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GRIMDARKEST

How dark is too dark?

Good lord it is simply impossible to get away from video games based on Games Workshop titles right now. Last month we had a new Imperial Guard-based co-op shooter announced, and this month we have a big preview of the Blood Bowl game. And, as we go to print, Necromunda: Hired Gun has been released.

Every time we hit PEAK Warhammer, it just gets bigger and bigger.

However, that's not what's on our cover this month. Rather, while we're sticking with a certain grimdark aesthetic, we're looking instead at Darkest Dungeons 2, a game which certainly has more than a passing familiarity with Games Workshop's design ethic - and we mean that in the best possible way.

Ironically, however, the game's moved away from the dungeon crawl in favour of, well, a road trip from hell. But with swords and dark magic.

So, you know... your average road trip.

David Hollingworth

"Every time we hit PEAK Warhammer, it just gets bigger and bigger."

WELCOME

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Go on the darkest road trip of all and try not to die... too much.

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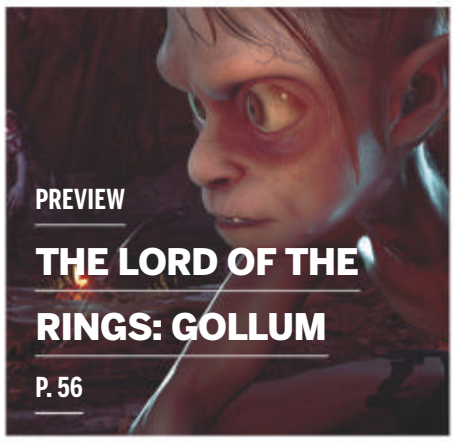

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HUMBLE HEAL RAISES OVER A MILLION DOLLARS FOR COVID-19 CHARITIES

After a difficult few months for Humble, charities win out.

Humble Bundle's recent "Humble Heal: COVID-19 Bundle" raised US$1,170,824, it announced in a recent blog post.. While games were at the forefront of the bundle, including indie hits like Superhot and Undertale, books and other software were bundled in.

The Humble Heal bundle, which ran in early May, was unique in that a fixed 100% of the money raised will be going to the charities nominated by Humble. The traditional Humble model splits proceeds between the nominated charity, the publisher, and Humble, with buyers being able to choose how to divide their money. With this bundle however, all proceeds should be split equally between Direct Relief, Doctors Without Borders, International Medical Corps, and GiveIndia.

"At a time when the country's healthcare system is crumbling under the second wave of the pandemic and Indians are facing so much devastation, you have come forward and joined hands with us to provide critical patients with life-saving aid," said Priyana Prakash, the Director of Partnerships at GiveIndia in a statement to the Humble community.

The cancelled Fallout Van Buren is being remade as a New Vegas mod

It's called Revelation Blues, for legal reasons.

Van Buren was the codename for a sequel to Fallout 2 being developed by Black Isle Studios until it was cancelled in 2003. Information about this lost Fallout 3 that could have been has appeared online in the years since, lending it a mythic quality among Fallout fans. A group of modders are currently dedicated to recreating Van Buren as a New Vegas mod called Revelation Blues, since InXile currently owns the Van Buren name.

"We will stay faithful to the original Van Buren story as much as possible," says the project's page on NexusMods, "and in the future we plan to add in a large number of customised features. As of now, the project is still a WIP."

The original Van Buren would have been set in the year 2253 and cast players as an escaped prisoner, roaming the American southwest while pursued by robotic prison guards. Post-apocalyptic versions of places like Denver and the Grand Canyon would have featured.

Well, here's a nude Geralt Skyrim mod

Modder matthouss is responsible for Unique SOS body type and skin textures for Geralt follower, the mod that gives the White Wolf an appropriate nude mesh. To use it you'll also need Geralt of Rivia voiced follower and SOS: Schlongs of Skyrim, as well as whichever of Skyrim's adult mods you prefer. Some of those links are NSFW, in case you needed to be told.

Logistics and city builder Workers & Resources: Soviet Republic has helicopters now

The latest update for W&R:SR adds helicopters to the game, versatile vehicles which make their appearance shortly after Workers & Resources' 1960 start date and allow you to haul passengers, workers, and even construction materials via skycrane.

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Gaming news

SYBERIA CREATOR BENOÎT SOKAL HAS DIED

The creator of the cult adventure game series was 66.

Benoît Sokal, Belgian comic book artist and creator of the adventure game series Syberia, has died at the age of 66. According to a statement from publisher Microïds, Sokal died on May 28 of an unspecified long-term illness.

Sokal began creating comics about an anthropomorphic duck detective named Inspector Canardo for Franco-Belgian magazine À Suivre ("To Be Continued") in the 1970s. He repurposed a storyline from those comics as the basis for his first adventure game Amerzone, published by Microïds, in which a journalist travels to South America to prove the existence of a mysterious species of white bird not seen since 1932.

Sokal's next games, Syberia (2002) and Syberia 2 (2004), were his breakthrough, finding success years after adventure games had stopped being regular best-sellers. Starring lawyer Kate Walker, the Syberia games were a journey across Europe and Russia that showed off Sokal's gift for unusual architecture and atmospheric backdrops.

A modder is reviving the lost Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory singleplayer campaign

It'll be released to the RealRTCW mod on Steam.

Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory was one of the great multiplayer shooters of its day, delivering what was at the time uniquely class-based, objective-based gameplay. It came off the back of the success of singleplayer Return to Castle Wolfenstein, but it was multiplayer only—at least, it was at the time. It had an unfinished singleplayer campaign cut during development, long considered lost, but with the recent revival of Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory by modders one man, William Faure, is bringing back that dream.

This follows on the heels of a major mod project, called RealRTCW, that remade Return to Castle Wolfenstein itself.

Faure is taking the six Enemy Territory maps and making them into both singleplayer and cooperative experiences. He's not a stranger to modding the game, either, because he's the person behind an extensive RealRTCW mod called The Dark Army: Uprising, an unofficial sequel to the RTCW story.

Far Cry 6 'isn't a political statement' on Cuba, narrative director says

In a newer interview with The Gamer, narrative director Navid Khavari said that Far Cry 6 is not an attempt to make any sort of political statement about the country. "When you talk about guerrillas, you think of the guerrillas in the 1950s and 1960s, we actually went down there to speak to actual guerrilla fighters who fought back then, and we just really fell in love with their stories," Khavari said.
Not at all political.

Creepy action adventure Graven is now in Early Access

Action-adventure Graven tasks you—disgraced priest, unjustly exiled—with rooting out evil and corruption in its gothic medieval world by destroying eldritch terrors. The tools at your disposal? Righteous anger (aided by magic, naturally), but also wrist-mounted crossbows, flails, and an explosive peat launcher, with more weapons to come.

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DAD'S ARMY

Generals are always fighting the last war, and so are game developers.

We tried to remake James Cottee a few years ago, but it turns out you can't improve perfection.

Astonishing news hit the gaming world recently: Free Radical Design has re-formed, with founders Steve Ellis and David Doak at the helm. After an agonising, interminable absence, the TimeSplitters series will finally return.

MicroProse is back too, and the reborn publisher isn't just another example of franchise necromancy – it's bringing out a slate of spiritual successors and fresh new games, primed to bring the magic of accessible milsims to a new generation.

Nostalgia-driven relaunches and reboots are not a new phenomenon; we've seen this trend across the entire spectrum of entertainment for years. Quality and coherence don't necessarily matter with such products. Disney can explain that Cruella de Vil became a fur-obsessed villainess after her mother was murdered by dalmatians, and credulous kino consumers will lap it up.

If a slick new product reminds you of something you liked when you were 11, then you'll be irresistibly drawn to it. It's an involuntary response, and nothing to be ashamed of.

But there are two sides to the nostalgia effect: the punters who love old properties, and the even older creators who made them. And more and more we're seeing those creators revisiting the games that made them famous.

David Crane created Pitfall for the Atari VCS forty years ago, and he's had a storied and accomplished career since. Yet he recently formed a new company, Audacity Games, that's making brand new Atari games on brand new cartridges. With the latest dev tools and a lifetime of experience, he's squeezing performance once thought impossible out of that ancient system.

Jeff Minter is renowned for his psychedelic arcade-style classics: Tempest 2000, Llamatron, Polybius, and many others. He's always strived to push the latest technology to the limit to overload your optics, but he's recently been dabbling with the code to his ancient Commodore 64 game Revenge of the Mutant Camels. You couldn't really patch games back when they were sold on cassette tapes, so Minter has been making up for lost time by fixing some collision detection bugs that had clearly been bothering him for decades.

We see something similar in the board game realm, with Steve Jackson refining and re-launching games from the 70s and 80s: Ogre, Wiz-War, The Fantasy Trip, and more besides.

These efforts are not idle hobbies – they cost a lot of time and resources. David Crane has joked that he'll have to sell a million Atari cartridges for his new company to break even; he's clearly not doing it for the money. So what drives these titans of gaming to return decades later to revisit their greatest works?

Military leaders are often criticised for their outdated thinking, for 'fighting the last war.' But I think this judgement is unfair. It would be more accurate to say that the greatest challenges we face come to define our view of the world, forming a prism through which we see all subsequent events. I don't know about you, but I have more nightmares about high school than anything else.

The urge to create spiritual successors is a powerful one. Take flight simulators, which contrary to popular belief are not a dead genre – far from it. The armchair Biggles of today finds himself spoiled for choice: there's the obsessive simulation of DCS, the more casual action of War Thunder, the arcade mayhem of Ace Combat, and of course the planet-sized Microsoft Flight Simulator. And then there's Tiny Combat Arena, a retro-looking 90s-style flight sim that catapults the player back in time. Its low-poly Harriers and F-4s harken back to an era before ray-tracing, before cloud-synching, before TikTok. Tiny Combat Arena recreates no classic flight sim in particular, but it recaptures a certain feeling. In an alternate time-line it might have been available in a big box edition from the Pitt St Angus & Robertson...

However obsessed you were with the video games of your youth, those who actually made them obsessed over them much, much more. Even now their creations stalk the corridors of their imaginations, waiting for the right moment to break free and be compiled anew.

Obviously, not every one of these re-launched classics is going to hit the mark. Dino Dini's Kick Off Revival was an embarrassment, and quite possibly the worst soccer game in existence. But you can see why he was compelled to make it. You have to respect the dedication it takes to make something that ambitious, even when it falls on its face.

I believe this trend is just getting started. We will see more legends return from the wilderness to dazzle us with their reforged creations. Who knows, maybe SSG might finally realise the late great Ian Trout's vision for the ultimate simulation of the Napoleonic Wars. At this point, nothing should surprise us.

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GENXX

There are few places left where it is safe to hunt without being tracked by Indian Agents, but you come across a hunting party who are resisting assimilation. One of the hunters greets you. Hunter: "Boozhoo, gibakade ina?" ("Greetings, are you hungry?")

ALL THE DIFFERENCE

Not less travelled, just waiting to be explored.

Last edition, I played The Curious Expedition 2 and The Oregon Trail, and enjoyed them, but was ultimately left feeling quite empty. I wanted to respond by trying to fill a kind of historical, indigenous-perspective-sized hole, but then I found When Rivers Were Trails. It's not filling a hole. It's overflowing; a beautiful experience, entirely in and of itself. Beautiful, but sad. It tells the story of (forcibly) displaced people in late 19th century America, and shares its cultural wisdom very generously, featuring the work of more than thirty indigenous creators.

The game begins by allowing you to choose from four clans, including the Bizhiw-Lynx (protector/fighter) and Ajijaak-Crane (spiritual-communicator). You're warned that survival depends on mental, emotional, physical and spiritual well-being. I certainly joined my ancestors, with well-being depleted, from resisting arrest, catching dysentery and crossing treacherous mountains. Hunting, gathering and trading allow for the management of food and medicine, too, and the first thing I noticed about the game is that the people you meet are keen to share.

Wanting to be similarly generous, I found that gifting food and medicine was often rewarded, in a variety of ways. My favourite trades were for stories about regional flora and fauna. You begin in Fond Du Lac, as allotment and assimilation arrived in Minnesota, forcing people away from their land and onto reservations. For the Anishinaabe, this meant that the community was split into two, geographically, and that people disagreed about how to divide their land. You gather belongings and leave immediately. Many of the first people you meet are also on the move.

Across three playthroughs, I wandered. The path diverges and there is no turning back, so it's quite replayable. As I retraced some of the same steps, I understood more of what I missed the previous times. People told me of places I might call home. There is at least one ending. It was never going to be fair but it was a great ending, nonetheless. In a way, it almost made all of the game's nebulous antagonists, chiefly Indian Agents (who were entrusted with "protecting" Native people, but also controlled them with violence), feel very small.

The overwhelming impression I've taken away from When Rivers Were Trails is how incredibly diverse Native American people are. The game emphasises the richness of cultural practices, as well as highlighting how treatment often forced people to act against their culture. I contacted designer, Beth LaPensee, who linked me to a private lecture on indigenous games. She mentioned playing The Oregon Trail as a child and wondering why Natives were always cast in relation to, or to serve, settlers. As an educational resource, this game is an incredible response.

This is not to say there were no settlers (or, at least, references to them) in the game. There was a woman who married a white man in order to stay on her land and some mention of towns with bicycles. I also met a "black man" who was a train porter and thus fell down a rabbit hole of learning why people used to call all train porters "George". (It's derogatory and related to the ownership of slaves.) Overwhelmingly, near exclusively, the faces in When Rivers Were Trails are Native. I can't encourage you enough to meet each and every one for yourself.

Meghann O'Neill, was still terrible at hunting minigames, like in The Oregon Trail, only this time she was also bad at fishing and canoeing, too.

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Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

QA testers Rachel (Ashly Burch) and Dana (Imani Hakim) have each other's backs.

SEASON PASS

MYTHIC QUEST keeps facing real gaming industry issues with a smile.

Mythic Quest is a workplace sitcom about the dev team behind the most popular (fictional) MMORPG in the world. We talked to some of the actors and creators behind the show (which is co-produced by Ubisoft Film & Television) about the serious game industry issues it tackles with humour, how gamers and developers have responded to the show, and if there are any similarities between making a game and making a show *about* a game.

In Mythic Quest's pilot episode, the team was scrambling to complete its first expansion, called *Raven's Banquet*, and season two similarly begins with the gang hard at work on the next expansion: *Titan's Rift*. And in some ways, it sounds like making the second season of a television show might not be all that different from releasing a new expansion for a popular game. Viewers, like players, want something new and surprising, but there's some danger in straying too far from the formula fans have come to expect.

"What we've heard from our partners at Ubisoft is that gamers hate when you change anything about the game, but they also hate when you leave it the same," says Mythic Quest co-creator, executive producer and writer Megan Ganz. We're a fickle bunch.

And that can be true of TV, too, says Ganz, a veteran of long-running shows like It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia and Community. "You're riding that line where it feels new and exciting, but it also still feels like the game that they all fell in love with."

At the same time, a new season (and perhaps a game expansion) provides a bit more room for creativity. "The nice thing about a second season of a TV show is that you've done all your work in the first season, your heavy lifting of setting up the characters and the situations, and making people fall in love with these characters," says Ganz. "And in the second season you just get to have fun."

ZOOM OR BUST

Game development isn't just used as a backdrop in Mythic Quest. In just the second episode it was already smartly taking on some very real issues in the gaming industry, such as when the dev team discovered that white supremacists absolutely loved playing *Mythic Quest*.

Another episode touched on how developers are forced to crunch to meet unrealistic deadlines. A special filmed and released during the COVID-19 pandemic effectively showed not just the struggles of working from home (such as trying to teach octogenarian writer CW Longbottom how to use a webcam) but the very real issues of isolation and uncertainty.

Real quest

To create footage of the *Mythic Quest* game, Ubisoft brought in developers from one of its studios, Red Storm Entertainment, to essentially build a real game. The studio, which has worked on series like *Far Cry* and *Rainbow Six*, built original assets and a working gameplay sandbox that could be filmed as actors played the fake (but real) game.

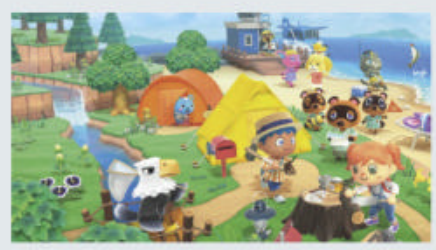
Season pass

FAR LEFT: Teamwork (eventually) makes the dream work.

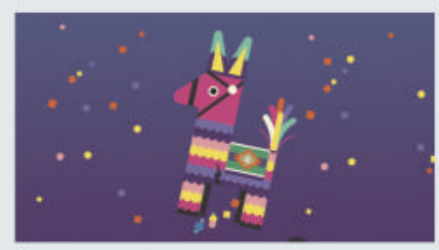
LEFT: Jo (Jessie Ennis) and Brad (Danny Pudi) take up arms.

INSIDE GAMING *What have the cast of Mythic Quest been playing during the lockdown?*

DANNY PUDI (BRAD)
BREATH OF THE WILD
"My son is making fun of me at this point. You still haven't finished this game?"



CHARLOTTE NICDAO (POPPY)
ANIMAL CROSSING
"It was actually one of the ways that I would hang out with my mom, who was back in Australia."



JESSIE ENNIS (JO)
TETRIS, TWO DOTS
"I recently was caught by my screentime app and found out how many hours I spend playing."

DAVID HORNSBY (DAVID)
FIFA
"I've gotten into *FIFA 21*. I'm playing weekend league now. I've got a club team with some high school friends."

And several episodes have addressed how difficult it can be for women and people of colour in the typically white male dominated industry.

Ashly Burch, who gamers already know from her dozens of roles in games like the *Borderlands* series and *Life is Strange*, plays QA tester Rachel on Mythic Quest, and also writes for the show. Her years of experience in the gaming industry went a long way toward informing the scripts and broaching these very real topics.

"Especially at the beginning of season one when I came in as a writer, that was a huge part of what I tried to bring to the writer's room, that perspective on the gaming industry and gaming culture," says Burch.

"And everyone on the show was really dedicated to trying to make Mythic Quest both a love letter to games but also accurate," Burch continues. "We didn't want to gloss over the fact that it's hard to be a woman in the games industry, or that it's hard to be a person of colour in the games industry sometimes."

"WE DIDN'T WANT TO GLOSS OVER THE FACT THAT IT'S HARD TO BE A WOMAN IN THE GAMES INDUSTRY."

Actor Imani Hakim, who plays Dana, another of Mythic Quest's QA testers, agrees. "The good thing is, this is a comedy so we're able to tackle these subjects and make them funny and find the humour within all of that," Hakim told us. "And it wouldn't be fair to make a show about gaming without talking about those adversities that women face in the gaming industry, and people of colour, we do talk about it. We don't push it in your face, but it's something that we're able to tell within the story, with humour. You will definitely see more of that [in season two]. It's authentic to the story."

Burch adds that another group was happy to see themselves reflected in the show: QA testers, whose dedication often goes unsung. "I've definitely had people on my Twitter feed say, thank you, I'm a QA tester, and we definitely feel like we're at the bottom of the totem pole, and it was really nice to see us represented in the show!"

And gamers give their feedback, too. Let's face it, if you make a sitcom about a paper company, you're probably not going to hear from tens of thousands of paper company employees. But if you make a show about games, you're definitely going to hear from gamers.

"I think we were really cognisant of that from the very beginning," says Charlotte Nicdao, who plays Poppy Li, co-creative director of the game. "And I know that during the development of the show one of the things that the writers and producers really wanted to do was create a show that was not making fun of gamer culture. The feedback that I've gotten is that the community sees that and it's all been really positive," she says. "And it's also been very cool to see all these actual game developers on Twitter talking about how a lot of this is very, very accurate to what their jobs are.

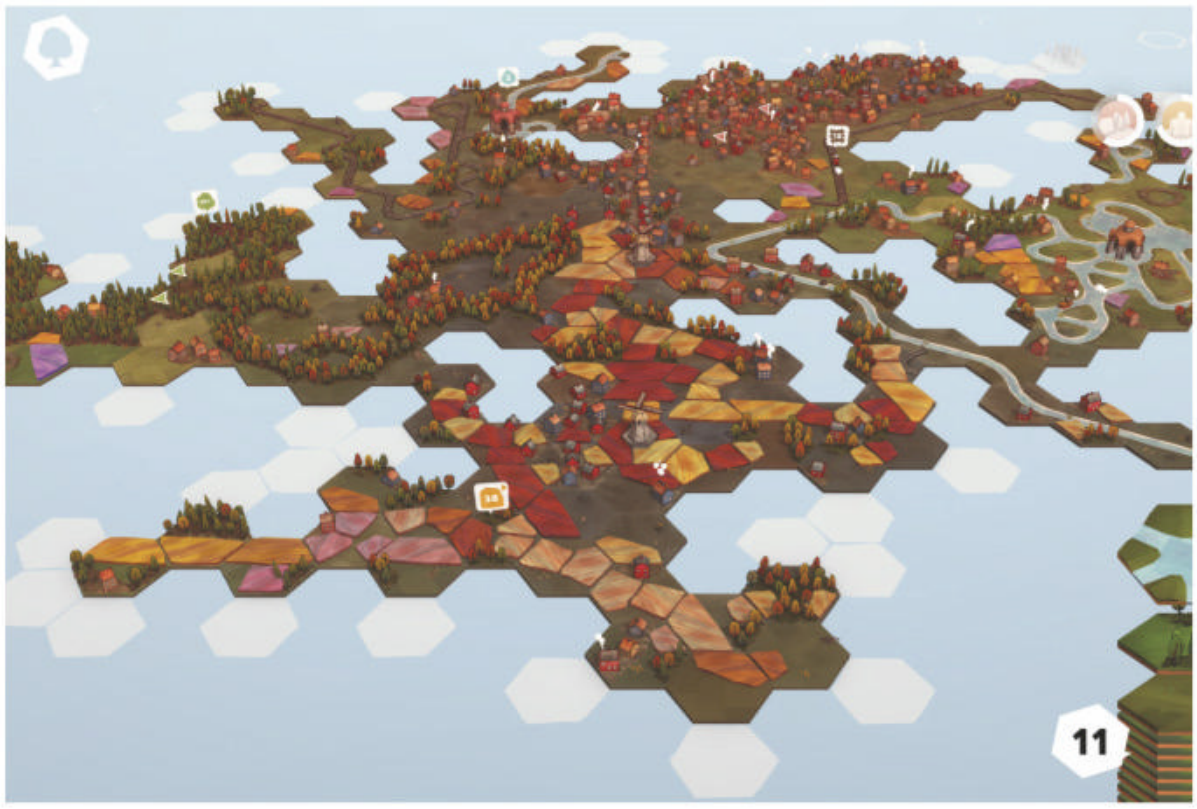
"It's fun to get to feel like we've been able to connect with that community. That was always something that we wanted to do." ■

Christopher Livingston

A collection aside

A COLLECTION ASIDE

It's been a month of contrasts for MEGHANN O'NEILL. She built a peaceful village without having to manage a single dollar. Then she squeezed every last cent from oblivious shoppers, just to improve her company's bottom line that tiny, last 1%. Next, a silly adventure game made her laugh, then a sad one made her go on a long, sad walk. Indie games continue to be incredibly diverse. You may want to play one of these games, or you may want to play them all. And that's why we love them so much; there's something here for everyone.



DORFROMANTIK

DEVELOPER Toukana Interactive **PRICE** $14.50 **AVAILABILITY** Early Access **WEBSITE** https://store.steampowered.com/app/1455840/Dorfromantik/

Around 25 years ago, I visited my cousin in Germany, near Dusseldorf. She was working with the military, didn't have a lot of spare time and (for the most part) left me to my own devices. I recall wandering down rambling rivers, through forests, and drinking warm gluhweine at brightly coloured pubs. Dorfromantik reconstructs this experience for me, piece by piece. It's incredibly relaxing, like my holiday, but also intensely stressful. I want to explore each lovely village forever, but the stack of tiles has to be perfectly managed at all times, or everything comes to an abrupt end.

My first impression, from screenshots, was that this might be similar to Townscaper, like an interactive artwork, based on beautiful, algorithmic chaos. Dorfromantik is much more of a "game". Each (seemingly) random tile must be played in order and has any combination of elements, including trees, houses, fields, grass, railway and water, on each of six edges. Matching similar edges boosts points and creates chains of elements for the purpose of fulfilling "quests", like creating a village with exactly 15 houses, or a forest with 500+ trees.

First, I simply learned how to create chains of adjacent forests, fields and villages. Then I learned to place quest tiles in order, from lowest to highest, allowing each chain to grow. The rewards are (usually) the additional tiles necessary to keep playing. Soon enough, forest quests were as mighty as to require thousands of trees but, if the forest chain already had 900 trees in it, it was achievable. Some quests create flags, which are a kind of quest to seal a chain. I've found that waiting until I have 4 or 5 flags in a chain can be extremely rewarding.

It's certainly possible to play with aesthetic goals in mind, but your town will end up small. As soon as your stack of tiles gets below whatever threshold you can tolerate (mine is 25), you need to work (single mindedly) towards completing quests. Or, you can aim for goals, some of which persist across games and may be unlocked by building out to "special" tiles. I built the ugliest, most ridiculous forest corridor just to unlock a special forest tile (I hardly ever roll) with a deer on it. Totally worth it. Doesn't sound worth it? It was. I can't even articulate why.

Indeed, this game is nebulously compelling. I've played it for hours. My highest score is only around 15,000 but I have absolutely pored over screenshots of higher scoring efforts, the largest I've seen scoring 72,480. There's a lot of luck involved, but you can manipulate just enough to genuinely control the game, for a time. It's perfect as it is, but I also can't stop thinking of what I'd add. A punishing undo button, the ability to collect a bank of "out of sequence" cards, post game turns where you can just fill in the holes and nothing more.

I was playing a village while writing this review, trying to think of the best way to summarise Dorfromantik. To my horror, I noticed I had only six tiles left and a disappointing 6350 points. I was completely lost in the flow of the experience, a mere 55 houses away from unlocking a tiny fountain. The game is now finished, but I briefly fought myself from three tiles to 35, thanks to four interlocking, and carefully planned, fields quests and two flags. I did not get my fountain. It's this combination of excitement and exquisite frustration that will keep me coming back for more.

RIP THEM OFF

DEVELOPER Lozange Labs **PRICE** $13 **AVAILABILITY** Released **WEBSITE** https://www.rip-them-off.com/

Do you remember Swim Out, the stylish puzzle game that cast the pool against you? My perception was that it was popular, but perhaps it wasn't. Looking now, it only has tens of reviews on Steam and a few hundred on mobile, despite being positively reviewed by a lot of games sites. When I saw Rip Them Off, also by Lozange Labs, I was excited to try it out. Although it has been released for more than six months, it seems to have generated even less chatter from players. It's a very clever game, though. I'm excited to tell you about it.

As well as Rip Them Off's low count of Steam reviews, most people aren't unlocking even the most basic of Steam achievements. I wonder if this is due to initial instruction being incredibly obtuse. There are a lot of pieces to the game and hardly any are (even slightly) explained. I nearly gave up on the second tutorial level. I watched a lone YouTuber fail it as many times as I had, similarly confused. Then, I found a guide the developers have published on Steam, which possibly should have been included in the game, to explain aspects of the UI, and it helped a lot.

I've now completed more than half of the game and I love it. It's all about observation and feel. In fact, I think that a very explicit tutorial would have ruined my (eventual) understanding of how things work. I can open a new level, look at every piece carefully and make decisions that are nearly good enough, then tweak them until they are. Each time I try, I gain more insight. Where are shoppers coming from? How fast are they walking? Which shops have enough capacity and a fast enough turnover to meet demand in any given location? What can I build now and upgrade later?

The developers describe their (curiously unique) gameplay as, "a puzzle game of economic management and tower defence". It's also kind of a rhythm game. And, the Mini Metro of shopping sims, being minimalist and abstract. I particularly loved the moment when I realised I could slow shoppers down by placing a "high capacity, slow exit" shop in front of another "slow exit, low capacity" shop. And that (occasionally) doubling "slow exit" shops is effective, too. Shoppers will walk past if a shop is full to capacity, or if they're offered a shape they already have.

It's remarkably simple, conceptually, but as you progress through levels, the complexity gets intense. As well as managing speed, shops cost different sums to build and shoppers will pay varying amounts for different shapes. Some shops will sell to multiple routes and the action will play out over increasingly more stages, or days.

I can't imagine how difficult it must have been to balance Rip Them Off so that it made any kind of sense. The art is engaging and it has been reviewed positively by the press. I think the challenge may be getting players to buy into the obscurity of its abstraction, at least long enough to get a feel for how it works. I've deliberately tried not to be too explicit in describing the game because learning to understand it is the entire point. Treat these people as if they were a rhythmic stream of wallets to be systematically emptied, as efficiently as possible, and you'll get it eventually.

A collection aside

INSPECTOR WAFFLES

DEVELOPER Goloso Games **PRICE** $18.50 **AVAILABILITY** Released **WEBSITE** https://store.steampowered.com/app/1055850/Inspector_Waffles/

Don't be fooled by the cuteness of Inspector Waffles' name. He's a bad cop. He acts without a warrant. He drinks his milk strong. When he gets stuck on a case, he calls his mum for help. Wait, what? This (actually) cute adventure game has a hilarious, inbuilt hint system. Waffles' mum, a retired inspector, will give you a context specific hint, but she'll also check if you've washed your jacket and are coming for lunch on Sunday, just to make you feel like a kitten. As you may know, I love low spoiler hints and Waffles' mum stops just short of a full solution.

Cleverly, Waffles' mum is one of two things that effectively allows players to control the difficulty of their adventure game experience. You can also turn on a system of highlighted clues, so that keywords in the dialogue will appear in yellow. For example, Waffles might say, "There's a hole at the bottom of the door," with the words "a hole" being in yellow, prompting you to explore the hole. It doesn't feel like cheating, it just focuses your attention. With this turned off, it's more like a classic adventure. With it turned on, puzzling is faster and fun.

Oddly enough, I was more often stumped by the UI, to begin with. Given the hint system, I would have (at least) expected a button to toggle hotspots, but you're often pixel hunting through a glut of chunky, colourful scenes to find what else you can interact with. The dialogue system is also confusing, to start with, but then fleshes out puzzling well. Conversation progresses through "questions" and, for each, you then select relevant "clues" or inventory items to learn new information. Occasionally, the order doesn't flow logically, but it's great, overall.

I have to admit to laughing out loud, on several occasions. There's the cat puns. And the dog puns. The best humour occurs when the animals are behaving according to their innate nature, but aren't aware of it. A group of cats, at a crime scene, can't figure out a dog's computer password, because they can't think like a dog. Even funnier is when you need a hairdryer and have to find the breed of dog who would have one. Here was I thinking that it was poodle owners who wanted their poodle to get a fancy makeover, but no, it is the poodles themselves!

My favourite character is Spotty, your sidekick. He's just like Kim Kitsuragi, from Disco Elysium; loyal and law-abiding. At one point, you tell him to "stay" and, (game) hours later, he is exactly where you left him. Unlike many adventures, where you are constantly exploring static scenes, the story is dynamic, everything is constantly changing. Even solving a tiny puzzle is an excuse for something to change. Then, suddenly, you're playing as your boss, with an inventory full of candy and one clue written in your notebook, querying who would be stronger, a hippo or an elephant.

Every item and gag are there for a reason, even if you don't know why, at first. There are a couple of great plot twists, too. Even using the jukebox to scroll through the game's music prompts Waffles to mention the locations where you heard each of them. (I love how the music always speaks to both the detective-related context and each cutscene or location.) Ultimately, Inspector Waffles is a story about placing your hand into the trash can to look for clues because it's what you need to do to keep the city safe, even if it makes you feel like an alley cat.

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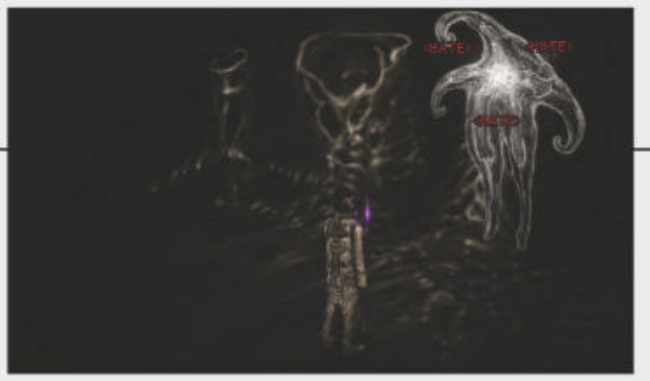


STRANGELAND

DEVELOPER Wormwood Studios **PRICE** $TBA **AVAILABILITY** Released **WEBSITE** http://www.wadjeteyegames.com/games/strangeland/

I loved Primordia. It's old enough now that I almost didn't recognise it in Strangeland's orange, glowy, (sort of) monochromatic palette. And it is suddenly purple, occasionally, in this case, too. Same studio and artist, same lonely feeling, same intense attention to detail. Did I want to play it? Absolutely. My only hesitation was that, being pre-release, I couldn't call Waffles' mum for a hint and might get stuck, on deadline. As it happens, Strangeland also has an inbuilt hint system. It's less cute, more dire, all while providing a confronting lesson about the need to be kind to oneself.

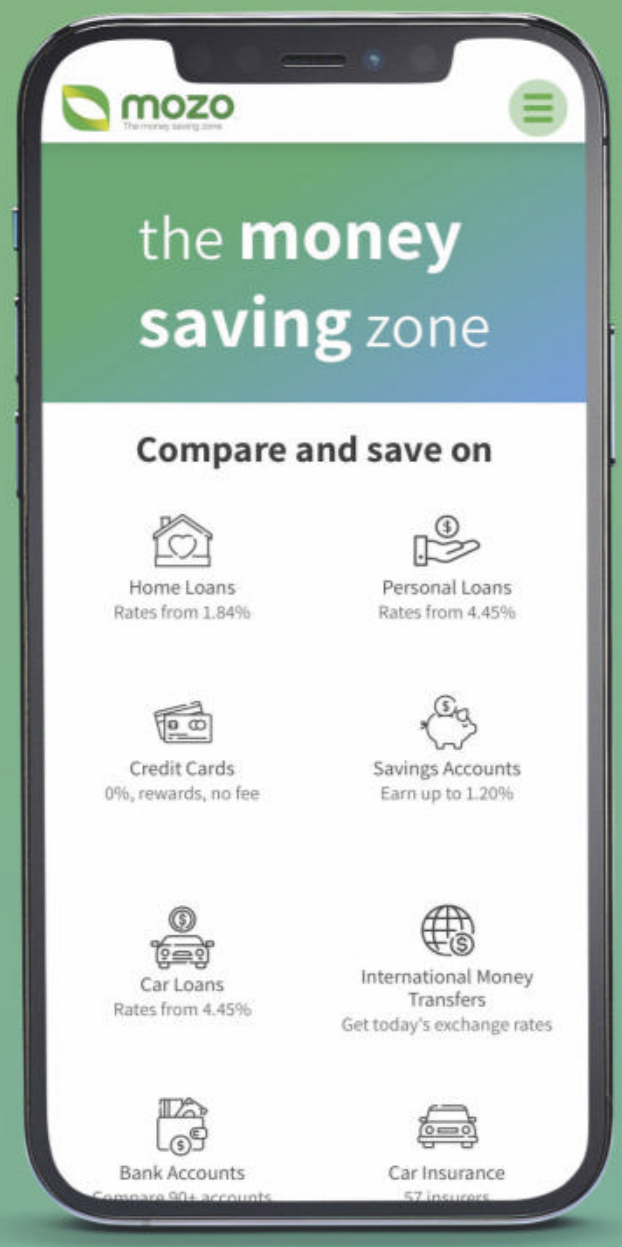
You're a guy. There's a fun park, of sorts, called Strangeland. You'll die a lot. In some contexts, you'll kill yourself. This is linked to the idea that death can be sudden, in the classic point and click adventure genre, but your death also sometimes occurs in the context of hopelessness, so you may want to make the decision to play (or not) with this in mind. I found the game to be extremely sad, to the point that I remained sad for a few days afterwards. I don't want to spoil content, but this is likely a sadness many will be able to relate to.

The story told is also very beautiful. I'm glad I finished it. You'll meet a host of unlikely characters, from a very old, very blind man, to an angry, space starfish. Some are beautiful, like the golden cicada, others are bizarre, like the mouthy teratoma and her slippery eyeball. Always, they're worth talking to. The human characters are (almost) all men, including the three women explicitly dressed as men, and I entirely understand why. As a woman, I almost felt as if I were intruding on a private experience that was relatable, but nonetheless male.

The protagonist's (usually) weary demeanour contextualises events, even if you can't understand why for a really long time. Everything is a metaphor, although some seem deliberately careless, obscure, or irreverent. I haven't included screenshots of the second half of the game because I'd like you to discover it for yourself. Structurally, both in terms of mechanics and story, things change in a way that is somehow both shocking and anticipatory. The puzzles get easier, but not in the kind of way I'd usually hate. You're simply able to understand them better.

The hint system is occasionally inconsistent, and perhaps deliberately confusing, but I loved the times it made sense only when you were already working on a problem. I got stuck a few times, usually when a puzzle suddenly changed its rules (not in a bad way). Generally, puzzles were beautifully crafted. Many were complex and made me feel clever, but I also think it would have been OK if the game had had the confidence to make clues less explicit. There's a mix of logical and visual puzzling, with an occasional moment of listening carefully thrown in.

Black dogs, dark things, ravens, cannibalism, murder. (Almost) nothing in Strangeland is pretty. I'm told there are divergent paths to take, but they may only be for the most avid hunter of secrets, as I can't picture playing again. I obviously made narrative and mechanical choices but my impression was one of linearity or, perhaps, inevitability. This is definitely the best adventure game I've played in a long time, even if it was exhaustingly existential. I feel a bit wiser and a bit wearier, as if it revealed a hole inside of me that can be covered over but never quite filled.



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Darkest Dungeon II

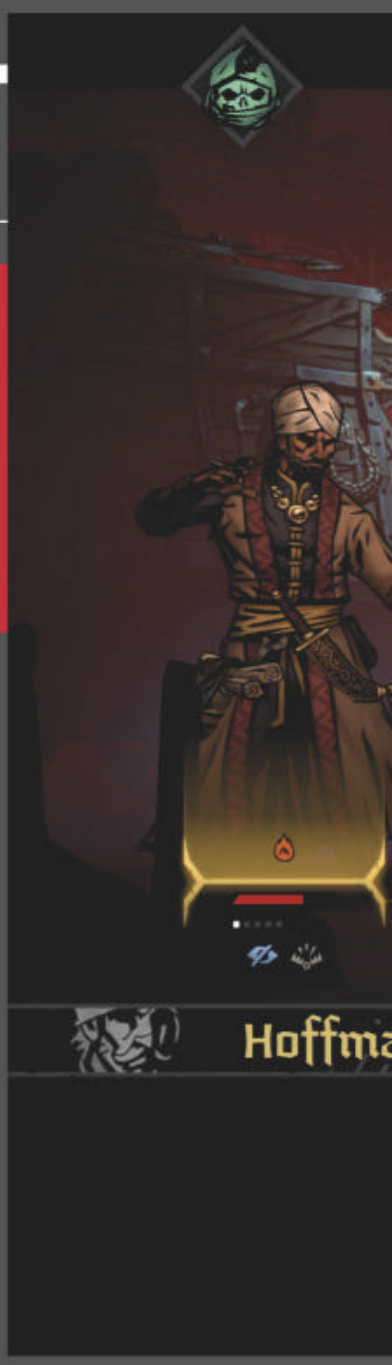
DARKEST DUNGEON II CHARTS A NEW PATH THROUGH

RIDE OR DIE

TERROR IN A ROGUELIKE ROAD TRIP TO SAVE HUMANITY.

JUST MIND THE 'NEXT EXIT: MADNESS' SIGNS.

By Wes Fenlon



ABOVE: So... you guys into chains?

BELOW: The skull meter in the corner tracks the progress of the darkness. Keep it low by fighting enough battles.

The world is dying. Tendrils of darkness crawl across the land, swallowing up everything but the battered road ahead and your flickering torch, the world's last hope for salvation. The apocalypse has arrived – but if that sounds bleak, you've probably never played *Darkest Dungeon*.

"The first *Darkest Dungeon*, the further you go down, the worse and worse and worse it gets," says Red Hook co-founder and creative director Chris Bourassa. Chris is about to convince me that this game about the end of the world, full of lost souls and horrifying monsters, is actually about *hope*. *Darkest Dungeon II* is a road trip, a roguelike mash-up of *Darkest Dungeon* and *The Oregon Trail* about clawing your way out of the darkness, rather than descending ever deeper into it.

LAST WAGON OUT OF HELL

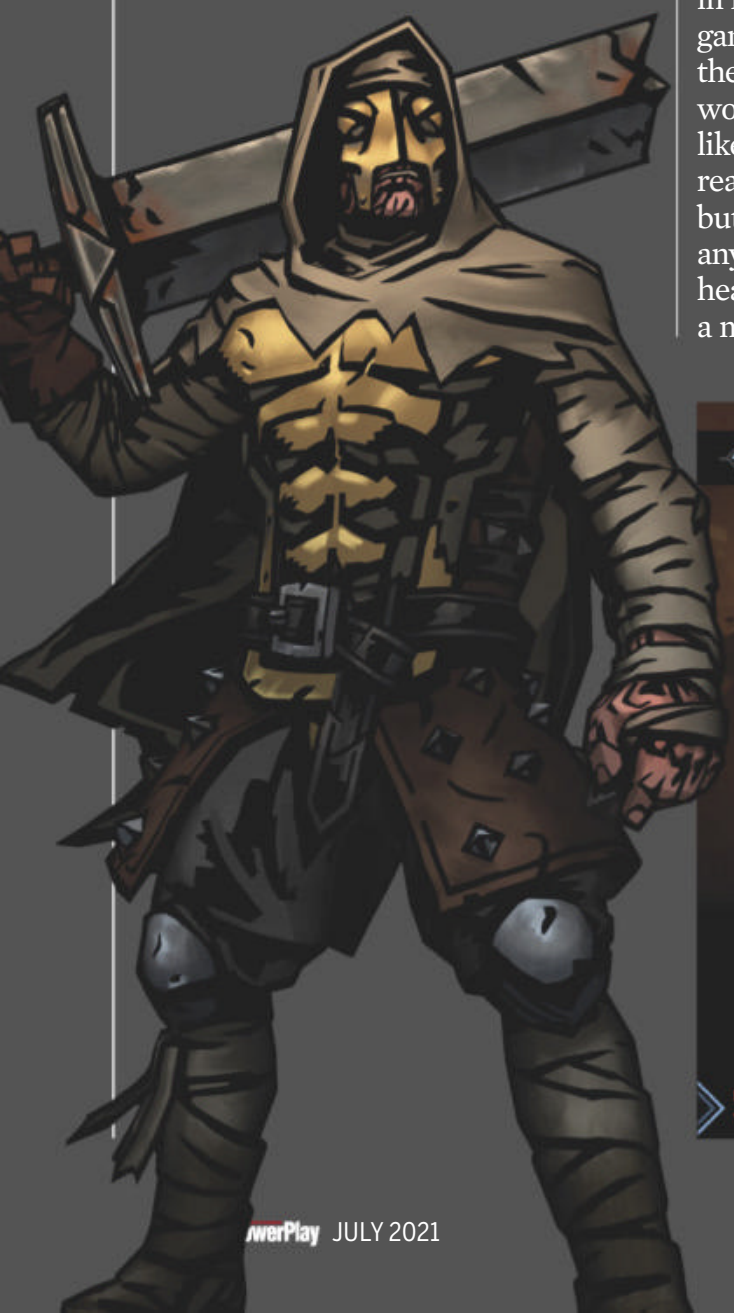
"The more you learn about The Ancestor, the worse of a guy he is," Bourassa says, looking back on the story he and co-founder Tyler Sigman created for *Darkest Dungeon* starting in 2014. "This guy was the worst piece of shit in history. You get to the end of the game and you're like, not only is he the worst, but the whole world is the worst, *everything's* the worst... I feel like six years into Obama we were all ready to have some fun with nihilism, but it just didn't feel like we could go any further down. We went to the heart of the actual planet, revealed it's a monster, and then nothing matters."

DARKEST DUNGEON II WANTS YOU TO CARE MORE ABOUT YOUR FLAWED HEROES.

In Red Hook's first game, surviving a 40-plus-hour campaign meant putting dozens of heroes through the grinder and watching them go insane, then replacing them with fresh meat. *Darkest Dungeon II* wants you to care more about your flawed heroes. It's keeping the idea of quirks and stress creating unexpected, sometimes maddening surprises. But this time you'll be managing a party of only four heroes on a roguelike run to an ominous mountain, a brisk five hours if you survive the journey.

Shorter runs will hopefully be more inviting for players intimidated by the first game's enormous campaign. Like other modern roguelikes, there's meta progression between runs. And like *Hades*, *DDII* will have a story that evolves over the course of development in Early Access. The idea is for the game to be easier to get into but just as deep once you're hooked. "We want more people to feel worse," jokes Bourassa.

"There's some games where once you have the sequel there's no reason



to go back and play the original. We wanted to do a different structure," says Tyler Sigman.

They settled on the idea of a road trip, which Sigman relates to the teensy-bit-brighter tone, likening it to Lord of the Ring's quest to Mordor. The trip may be brutally hard, but this time there's some nobility to it.

"If you go back to this whole idea of settling west, it's people trying to achieve a better or freer life than their options where they are," he says (the *Oregon Trail* reference wasn't a joke). "I think those motifs, and dunking the ring in Mount Doom, are so powerful because the end goal is worth the trials of the journey. I think that is really important. The journey is terrible. You are leaving safety and going towards the worst possible thing you could, because somebody's got to do it."

A run in *Darkest Dungeon II* looks much like a journey up the tower in *Slay the Spire* or through the stars in *FTL*. Every region is divided into branching paths, each node a battle or ruin to investigate or an encounter with survivors who need your help. Helping them is one way to keep your torch, the symbolic and literal light of hope, burning bright. Somewhere in each region is a proper dungeon, home to a tough boss fight and better loot. A powerful trinket could transform a run, but tackling it is risky: any hero you lose is dead for good. "I don't think we could respect ourselves or look at ourselves in the mirror if we didn't kill your characters," says Bourassa. "They can die, and you can be on a run with two characters left. But we reward your progress at the end."

ARE WE THERE YET?

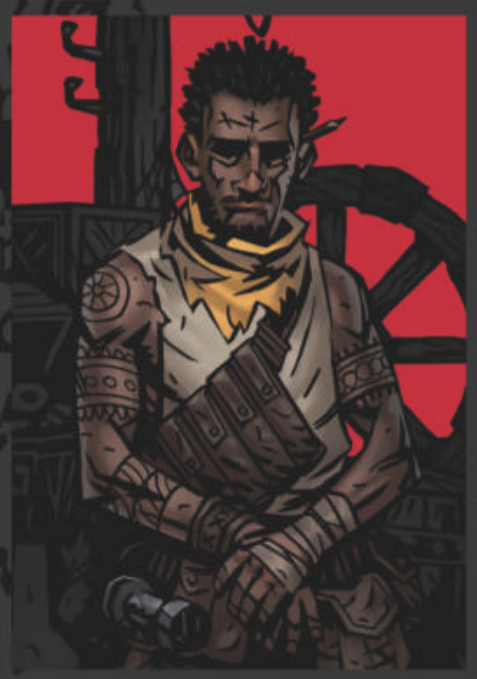
Like in a real-life road trip, *Darkest Dungeon II* is all about the personalities in the car. "I've done a few of them in my time, and you end up best friends with somebody and never talk to the other guy again, ever," says Bourassa. They've recreated that dynamic by tossing out the old afflictions caused by stress and creating an affinity system, where characters gain and lose favour with each other. Relationships have tendrils into every corner of the game. When you come to a crossroads, all four will have an opinion about which way to go. When you encounter strangers, your highwayman might want to rob them, while your man at arms wants to give them food. Whichever option you pick, somebody's likely going to end up angry and stressed. In combat, if your grave robber is near death and you have your plague doctor toss a healing potion to your highwayman instead, how do you think the grave robber's going to react?

Rack up enough positive or negative reactions and characters will form relationships. Good ones will pay dividends: friendly heroes might "pull a Kevin Costner bodyguard" or "double up Capcom style on the enemy", Bourassa says. But this being *Darkest Dungeon*, there are a few million ways for relationships to go terribly, terribly wrong.

"We like that every run can have a story. You can have a grave robber who gets hit with too much stress early on, then just gets real crummy

RIDE IN STYLE

Upgrade your wagon with parts you collect



CROWS NEST
A chance to scout ahead and reveal the encounters at upcoming nodes.

MEDICAL EQUIPMENT
Increases the passive heal rate for heroes while travelling.

WINDCHIMES
A chance to lower stress on a random hero on each stretch of road. Ahh, soothing.

to everybody. Hateful with the man at arms, jealous of the highwayman, just a toxic person. But she's probably better off alive than dead for the health of you run. That becomes the story of that time you had that awful lady in the back of the car and she was really mean to everyone."

Character quirks like 'clumsy' or 'kleptomaniac' will affect how members of your party play off each other, and stress piled on by being dragged to the dungeon or watching a friend die in battle can make them spiral out of control. Unlike in the first game, a full stress meter won't trigger a heart attack – it'll trigger a meltdown, where their health drops to death's door and all their relationships are reset. Their ensuing tantrum will stress everyone else out too, of course.

There may be runs where you intentionally trigger a meltdown to reset nasty relationships. You can also try to build positive bonds at the inn where your weary band will rest at the end of every region (it replaces camping from the first *Darkest Dungeon*). You can have your characters share a game of cards or a bottle of booze and hope they hit it off, but a negative quirk like egomania could make your good intentions backfire. "We always want to put you in a place where you're trying to make the most of a sub-optimal situation," says Sigman.

ABOVE: The world is literally falling apart around you.

BELOW RIGHT: Yep, that's pretty much the definition of 'things you don't want to run into in the dark'.

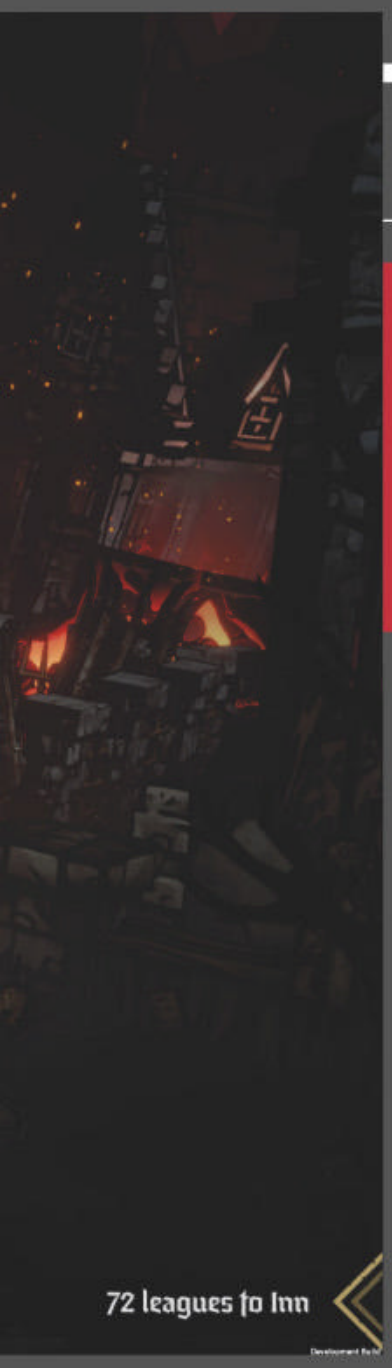
BATTLE LINES

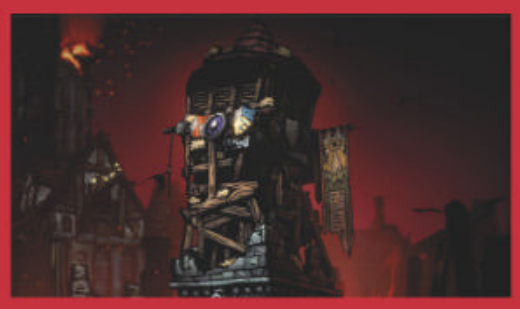
If you haven't played much *Darkest Dungeon*, combat in the sequel will look much the same to you. Your party still stands in a line, a selection of skills below. Each character's position is key, since skills can only hit certain distances. With each attack you get a cutaway animation as blade or bullet hits flesh.

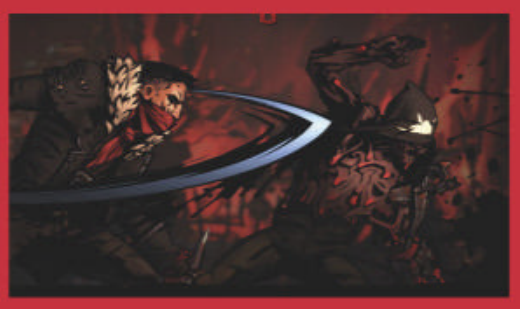
If you *have* played a great deal of *Darkest Dungeon*, combat will look strikingly different. It's in 3D now, for one thing, as is the whole rest of the game. Characters have bigger bodies and smaller heads, no longer cartoonishly proportioned.

YOU CAN HAVE YOUR CHARACTERS SHARE A GAME OF CARDS OR A BOTTLE OF BOOZE.

"There's really amazing preparatory animations in combat," Bourassa says. "If you click 'wicked slice' on your highwayman he whips his knife out and gets ready, and when you click a target he follows through. The result is combat feels way more alive. People are getting potions out and then launching them on your







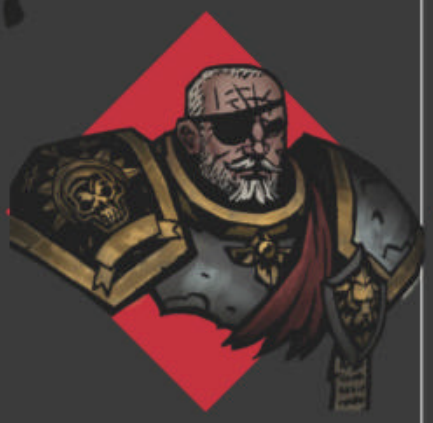
WHO'S WHO?

You'll have nine heroes to choose from at Early Access launch

GRAVE ROBBER
Armed with darts and throwing daggers, the grave robber is a speedy killer with an excellent hat.

OCCULTIST
A wielder of dark powers and strong crit chance who's especially good against eldritch creatures.

PLAGUE DOCTOR
A potion specialist who can heal allies and blight foes from the back row.



MAN AT ARMS
A defender who can buff allies with block tokens, keeping them alive (as healing is a rare treat).

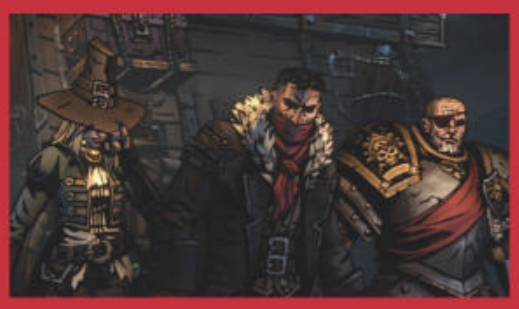
LEPER
A frontline bruiser who knocks back enemies and gets blind tokens after big swings. May need glasses.

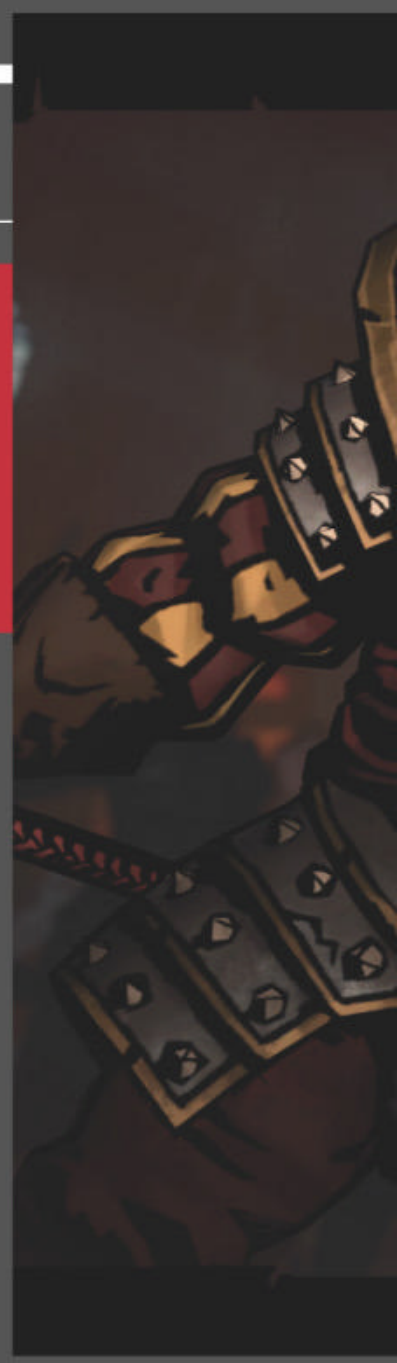
JESTER
The sickle and lute aren't a likely pair, but the Jester uses it to buff friends and make enemies bleed.

HIGHWAYMAN
With pistol in one hand and knife in the other, the highwayman isn't someone you want to run into.

HELLION
The Hellion, who had a starring role in *Horizon Zero Dawn*, uses a giant glaive to slice up enemy back rows.

UNKNOWN
What role will this mysterious newcomer fill? My guess is another heavy frontliner.





mouse clicks. Once you get into a flow, if you watch someone who knows how to play, even though it's turn-based it feels very fluid."

There are even more dramatic mechanical changes. Characters no longer have upgradeable armour or weapons, or stats like dodge and accuracy. These sweeping changes make combat 'chunkier' – designer speak for 'easier to understand.' Clearer information makes each turn more of a puzzle to solve than a slugfest to endure.

Darkest Dungeon II's battle makeover started with a radical move: ditching accuracy altogether. "We found over time that people just dislike missing so much that we ended up tuning up accuracy quite a lot over the lifetime of the [first] game," Sigman says. "So what if we just got rid of accuracy as a stat? You hit. You know you're going to hit – unless the opponent is dodgy, unless they have a block." To convey a dodge or a block, they condensed percent chances into tokens that represent concrete effects. If your character or an enemy has a block token, they're guaranteed to absorb 50% of their next hit.

ALMOST ALL THE EFFECTS FROM THE FIRST GAME HAVE BEEN CONVERTED TO TOKENS.

"We started doing that with all the mechanics and it was kind of an experiment at first. The concern was what if we make it too simple, but it ended up working." Sigman compares the token system to a card game like *Hearthstone*, where if an enemy has a creature with taunt on the board, that's an obstacle to work around. Almost all the effects from the first game have been converted to tokens – immobilise, stun, bleed, blind, even team-up combo attacks.

"It gets people thinking a little bit more," Bourassa adds. "I found that it erodes the natural inclination we saw in the first game for people to just use damaging attacks all day long." And so you now get to see the next few turns in the turn order, letting you plan out multiple moves in advance.

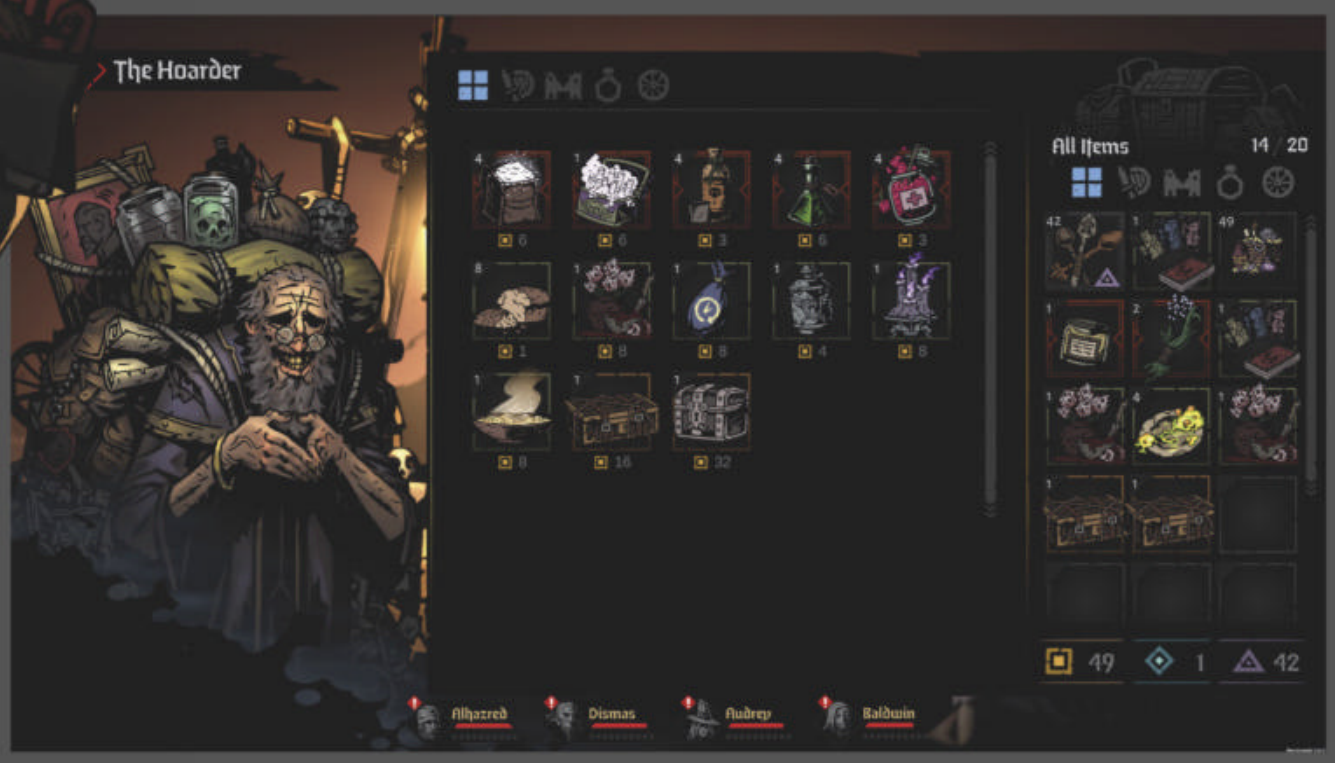
TRINKET FOR YOUR THOUGHTS

Characters do still have some stats: hit points, speed and resistances to status ailments like blight. But the simpler pool helped Sigman go wild designing trinkets, the only gear you'll be equipping. Once you found a trinket in the first game you could keep it forever, so popular strategies revolved around the most powerful ones. Trinkets usually had a negative stat trade-off, but only a few stats *really* mattered, so the design options were limited.

In *DDII* you may get lucky and find an awesome trinket in one run, but it'll be gone the next. "So basically we can get crazy," Sigman says. Instead of percent tweaks to stats, trinkets can now grant effects like starting every round with a pair of block tokens, or getting a crit token every time you miss an attack (which could stack well on the leper, who blinds himself after landing big hits). "That's the fun of a true roguelike. Sometimes you have a run and you get a crazy item and you're like 'I'm unstoppable'. That's a really fun place to be as a player." Trinkets will be divided into some standard loot tiers:

ABOVE: Every hit gets a nice close-up.

BELOW: The best part of every road trip: snacks!



commons, rares, epics. But there will also be trinkets unique to certain bosses and certain factions of enemies. Those will dangle an incentive to chance taking on a dungeon or fighting a tough battle against cultists to luck into a particular drop.

"There are a lot of trinket-based interactions and class skill interactions you can try to maximise," says Bourassa. "There's a lot of ways you can mitigate a class's downsides with trinkets and some help from his friends. That's awesome, but where we're hoping our game really comes into its own is '*what if they hate each other?*' They won't do [what you say], so you're sort of stymied even though you do have the optimal strategy in mind. I think that's quintessentially what we've tried to explore."

SKILLS FOR KILLS

Darkest Dungeon II is launching with nine heroes: eight familiar haggard faces and one new one still under wraps. Each returning class is now significantly expanded, from a pool of seven skills to eleven. You unlock more advanced skills by completing special encounters for each hero on multiple runs.

"We want you to feel rewarded that you put some time in the game. It directly translates into more flexibility in the run, more team

MEMORIES OF MURDER

Darkest Dungeon II *vs* Darkest Dungeon

1. Normal sized head.

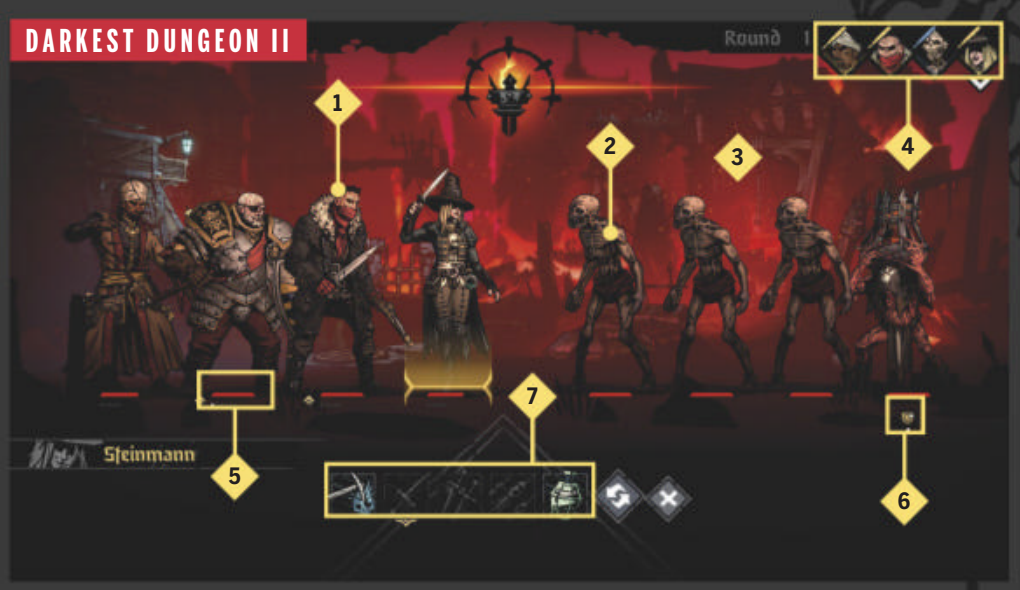
2 Sophisticated skeleton.

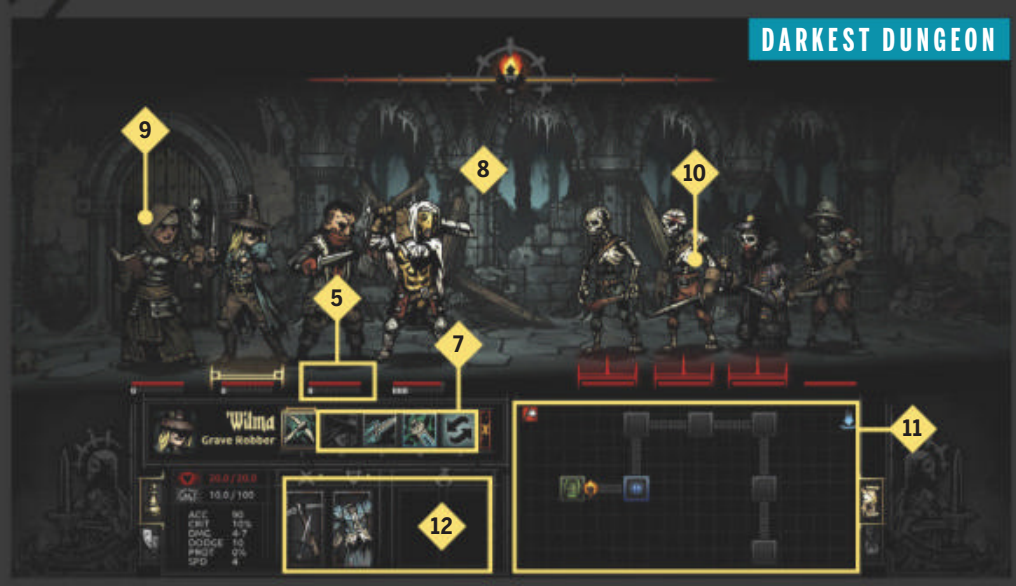
3. Oh look, world's burning.

4. Turn order offers a bit of foresight.

5. Stress and health meters are virtually identical

6. Block tokens mean they'll take 50% less damage from the next hit





7. Choose five abilities to use in the battle instead of four.

8. Oh look, a dungeon.

9. Big head.

10. Dumb skeleton.

11. No need for a dungeon layout on the combat screen anymore.

12. *DDII* doesn't have these gear slots (but you do still equip an item).

STABBING 2.0

A peek at some of the unlockable skills in **Darkest Dungeon II**

LEPER

INTIMIDATE
Taunts an enemy and hits them with a weaken token. Ideal to use on heavy hitting baddies.

RUIN
When the leper gets hit, he gains a stacking damage buff. Pair it with a taunt and hulk out.

GRAVE ROBBER

GLINT IN THE DARK
A powerful attack that ignores stealth and 20% of deathblow resistance.

ABSINTHE
If under 25% HP, they heals for 25% and gets a speed token and three dodge tokens to avoid attacks.

HIGHWAYMAN

HIGHWAY ROBBERY
Destroys any positive tokens an enemy might have on them, leaving them wide open.

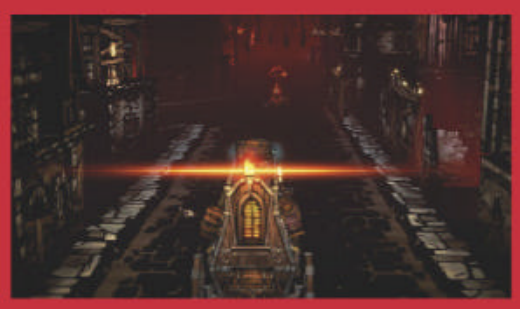
POINT BLANK SHOT
Places a combo token for a team-up attack, but can only hit when the enemy in the front row.

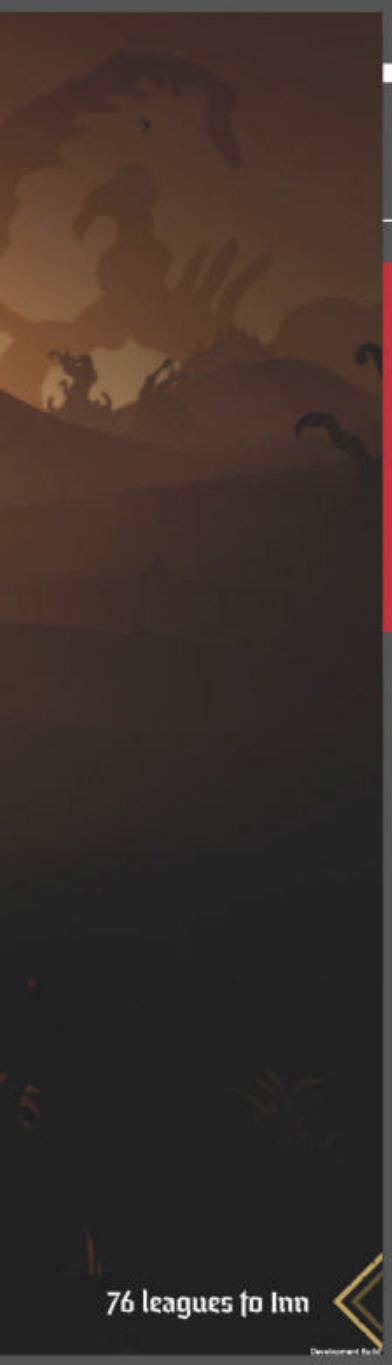
comps you can put together, and a greater chance of success," says Sigman. "It's not that we give you crappy skills to start, but the more skills you have the more you can adjust to the changing conditions on the road."

Those unlocks will go hand-in-hand with learning *Darkest Dungeon II*'s regions, so you'll know when you head into a region where enemies have high blight resistance, it's time to adjust your plague doctor's loadout. You can swap out skills on the road between encounters.

But Red Hook never giveth without takething away. You can no longer have multiple copies of the same hero in your party, and each run you have to choose from a bunch of heroes pre-rolled with a good and bad quirk. "It's not like Wizardry from the 1980s where you keep rolling till you get 18s across the board," says Sigman. "If you really wanted a leper this run but he's a pacifist or whatever, that makes you really choose."

Restricting you to a just single hero type per-party made the game easier to design – Sigman no longer has to think about what a party of four lepers plays like. But that decision was ultimately more about the characters themselves, "It keeps that experience of each hero being super unique and vital as a key part to that SWAT team."





ABOVE: Drive the wagon with mouse and WASD, but just don't expect to do any drifting.

FORWARD UNTO DAWN

Darkest Dungeon ended up with 18 classes after years of expansions. *Darkest Dungeon II* will grow, too. It's coming to Early Access in Q3 2021, and you'll be able to complete a run from the get-go: if you survive long enough to haul your flickering torch to the mountain's peak, ready to stop the world from crumbling, you won't be greeted by an 'under construction' sign. Bourassa says to expect a five-act story, with each act bringing a new boss to fight when you reach the mountain. It'll launch with act one.

EXPECT A FIVE-ACT STORY, WITH EACH ACT BRINGING A NEW BOSS TO FIGHT.

There will be four regions to struggle through at first, but the roguelike structure makes it easy to add more – likely in themed releases similar to the first game's. I imagine *Darkest Dungeon II* in its final form like a version of Mad Max Fury Road, where you find an epic trinket in the Bullet Farm on one run and die of blight in Gas Town on the next one.

It's hard to believe that the first game was built by a core team of just five people. Thanks to its success more than 20 are now working on the sequel. The bigger team means there are designers focused solely on creating monsters or heroes or skills, tasks Sigman once juggled while also managing payroll. Artists and animators are doing things with the new 3D models that would require more illustrations than Bourassa could've ever created by hand. But they're both still in the trenches.

"It was important we own it and have our hands right in it," says Bourassa. "All we know how to do is what we did the last time. If we throw all that out and hire a bigshot producer from EA to just run the whole thing, we don't know where that leads, right? All we really know is the experience we had together. So we tried to preserve as much of that as possible and still create inroads and ownership for the team along the way. It really stems from, we don't want to fuck it up, quite frankly."

In our hours of talking about *Darkest Dungeon II*, neither of them belaboured the connection between its more hopeful metaphor and their own intense creative process – that they both feel the need to take risks to make a videogame that satisfies them. But when my first run inevitably goes to hell and I contemplate leaving my petty egomaniac plague doctor by the side of the road, I know I'll think back to how Chris Bourassa describes the feeling he hopes this sequel can evoke after *Darkest Dungeon*'s bottomless nihilism.

"This game is more about trying to swim up, hoping you have enough air to break the surface, and the fear that you experience when you realise that it's just a little further out of reach each time," he says. "It's about trying to surface and trying to come to grips with your failures. But if you can manage to do it, there is a path to a better future." Or, at least, a path to a better trinket. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2021	Logic Artists	THQ Nordic	bit.ly/2Q30IWG

EXPEDITIONS: ROME

Swords, sandals, and a serious RPG under the toga.

The *Expeditions* series has invaded Mesoamerica with the Conquistadors and raided England with the Vikings, taking the idea of a historical RPG from a niche concept to a fan favourite. Now *Expeditions* is going to ancient Rome, and it's asking players to become one of the greatest conquerors of the age.

FIRST LOOK

Expeditions: Rome is the latest in the series, coming this year. It's a sprawling work of historical fiction set in a world where the player's custom character walks in the footsteps of Julius Caesar. Like previous games in the series, *Rome* won't focus on a precise retelling of the history, but rather use history as a jumping-off point. It's also going to take advantage of the new setting to shake up the underlying RPG mechanics, making the tactical battles more exciting and faster-paced than they were before.

"We never want to constrain ourselves to writing about specific events in history, but rather think about how to stay true to historical figures, periods and details such as how people dress, how they're armed, their religion, their view on other cultures, and so on," says Jonas Wæver, creative director at Logic Artists. Wæver has a passion for history – his father was a history teacher, and gave him "quite the stack of books" as mandatory reading about Rome. The studio's spin on Roman history shows in what I saw of the game, including some social encounters and combats spread across three regions of the ancient world: Asia Minor (part of Turkey these days), Egypt, and Gaul (now known as France).

"Historical events can be a jumping-off point for us when we insert the player into a particular part of history, but once the player character enters the world stage, all bets are off," says Wæver. "After all, this is a roleplaying game and one of the most important things for us is that the player should be free to choose, and can act in completely ahistorical ways."

HISTORY BOYS

Thus, you'll be your own Caesar: you'll meet major historical figures, but you'll form your own relationships, rivalries, or alliances with them. Customising your character in true RPG fashion means choosing a class and skills, but also a gender. Female and male characters have slightly different subplots to contend with, as the deeply-rooted sexism of patriarchal Roman culture will stand against women who seek power in Rome. "We wanted it to be a story of triumph and overcoming that adversity, so some artistic licence was needed," says Wæver.

And it sounds like there's a lot of triumph to be had, given that the game has seven endings and a "huge amount of further permutations based on the outcomes of side quests". Each of the five companion characters has their own set of outcomes in the end, as well, depending on how they approved of your choices.

Your character will be one of a handful of classes, each with three subclasses. These are Roman roles, each with access to a different set of weapons that give them their basic abilities. Thus you get classes like the shield-and-sword-wielding Princeps, a heavy infantry soldier who can be built as a shield-based tank, a crowd-controlling brawler, or an ally-supporting buffer. Other classes include the support-focused Triarius, a second-line veteran; the skirmishing Veles, dart-throwing light infantry; and the Sagittarius, a consummate archer. Unlike in previous games, characters get their attack actions from the weapon they have equipped – there's no basic attack to be seen. Wæver says the team was "really pleased" with eliminating the basic attack action from combat, because just swapping weapons opens up new options for the characters.

CHARACTERS GET THEIR ATTACK ACTIONS FROM THE WEAPON THEY HAVE EQUIPPED.

Expeditions: Rome

Your legion's camp upgrades over time, giving you benefits.

The forests of Gaul are a far cry from other environments.

"Now you get multiple different attack skills from the weapons you've equipped, and they're never just an attack – they always have some extra effects such as applying a status effect or dealing extra damage under specific circumstances, which raises the skill ceiling and rewards you for playing smarter," he says. It's all part of an increased emphasis on the mechanical design of the fighting in *Expeditions: Rome*.

"We have a much more significant power curve in *Rome* than we've had in previous instalments," says Wæver. "Health, damage, shield strength, armour, resistances, and skill complexity all ramp up gradually throughout the game." Those will be improvements from the style of game featured in previous *Expeditions* RPGs, and they're not the only ones. Wæver was clear that *Rome*'s three act structure provides more than just a plot. "Unlike in *Expeditions: Viking*," he says, "we're not dropping you into the deep end during character creation this time – skill choices are unlocked very gradually."

WORLD TOUR

The game starts during the wars between Rome and the Kingdom of Pontus, in what is now Turkey, then known as Asia Minor or Anatolia. The king Mithridates Megas has gathered Hellenic peoples, Greeks and Greek colonists, to go to war against Rome. The character is a young Legatus, a high-ranking military officer, and must fight both personal battles and make military campaign decisions in order to further their career as a Roman head of family and politician. Fighting Mithridates is the first step. "Then the story moves to Africa where we get to interact with the Berbers and the Egyptians," says Wæver, "and finally we head to Gaul to meet some of the myriad tribes of what is now France, Switzerland and Belgium."

Between acts the character goes back to Rome and checks in with their family, sees the benefits or takes the fallout from their actions in the field, and tries to advance themselves politically before they are sent back into the field. "That's really where the political aspects of the story unfold, and also where the consequences of all the decisions and all the actions you take during each of the wars really come back to haunt you," says Wæver.

One example was a smuggler working for the player's political rival. On finding the smuggler in the field supplying the enemy army, the player had to choose between getting the smugglers' boat before it escaped or going after the shipment of weapons and supplies that would make their next battle more difficult and get their soldiers killed.

And getting killed is a real danger. In tactical battles your party is generally outnumbered by the enemy, making a clever approach and smart positioning key. "Our goal has been to make combat feel fast and deadly," says Wæver. "Though you will sometimes run into very tough enemies, by and large the increased challenge comes from having to fight more and more enemies. We really want the player to live that fantasy of being a heavily armoured Roman soldier holding the line against a horde that vastly outnumbers you and your men."

To that end, Logic Artists has focused the new combat system on large combat arenas and mobile encounters. Moving quickly to avoid fighting unnecessary enemies and positioning yourself in striking distance will be a key tactic.

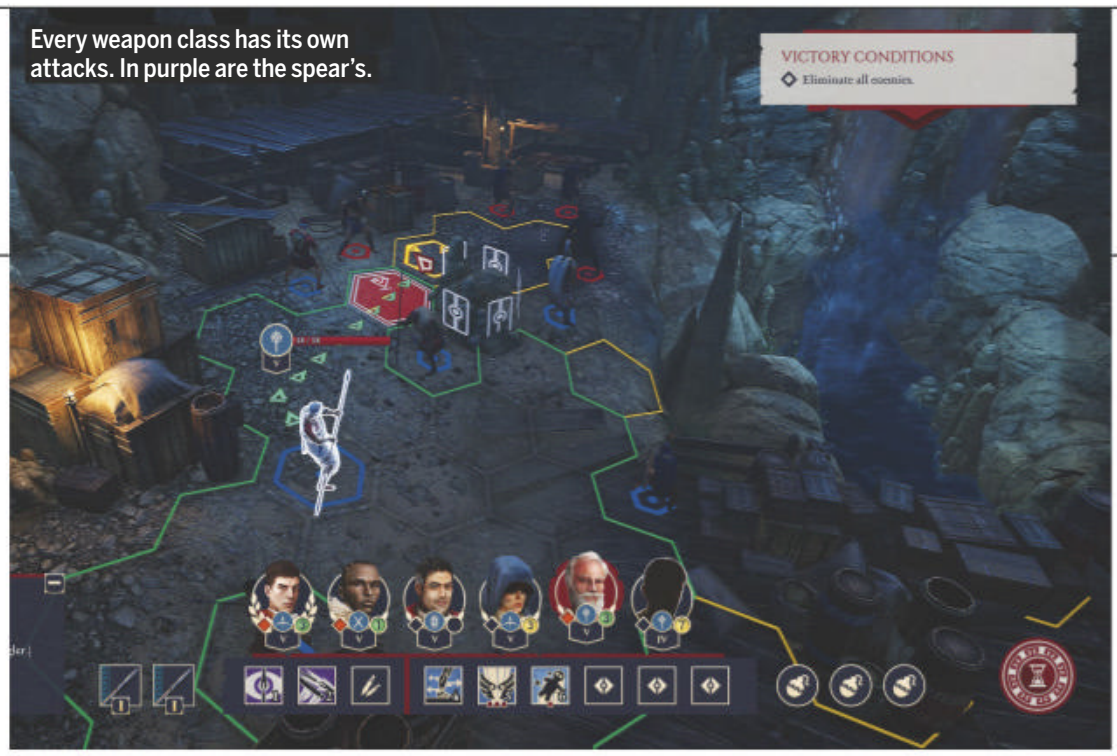
ORDER UP

More than anything Wæver and his team focused hard on speed. "One huge improvement we've made is to allow simultaneous execution of orders," he says, "This means you can tell one of your characters to move up and attack, switch to another character, and then tell them to do something else while the first character is still moving or swinging. This also means that interrupts such as attacks of opportunity no longer pause execution, they can just happen fluidly as part of another character's action. The AI can move multiple characters at the same time as well, which reduces the amount of time you spend waiting for the enemies to finish their turn."

This is the third *Expeditions* game, and it's been four years since the last one. *Viking* was well-received, but *Rome* is far more ambitious, aggressively moving the series' design forward. The narrative writing, characters, and combat that Logic Artists showed off in the preview were all more advanced and compelling than anything in its prior games. We'll find out if they can pull it off when *Expeditions: Rome* releases this year.

Jon Bolding

IN TACTICAL BATTLES YOUR PARTY IS GENERALLY OUTNUMBERED BY THE ENEMY.



Every weapon class has its own attacks. In purple are the spear's.

The dusty environs of North Africa are lush, in their own way.

Diablo II: Resurrected

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2021	Blizzard	In-house	diabloII.blizzard.com

DIABLO II: RESURRECTED

The satanic lord of action RPGs returns

While *Diablo II: Resurrected* overhauls *Diablo II*'s graphics, underneath the new 3D models, dynamic lighting and shiny puddles it's the same action RPG I was click-click-clicking through 21 years ago. It feels a bit simplistic today (the skill tree is tiny!), but that only makes me like it more. *Diablo II* still rules.

There are little tells that Diablo II: Resurrected is just a costume – the way the character model gently snaps to the eight directions the original sprite can face, for example – but I might not have believed that it's truly just a high-res version of Diablo II if it weren't possible to unmask. Press G, and the 4K world dissolves into the original low-res renders. It's extremely cool.

Aside from the redone graphics, not much has changed. There are quality of life and accessibility improvements, such as an automatic gold pickup option and colour-blind modes. The online functionality is being updated. Otherwise, this is a purely visual remaster.

I'm split on whether or not the new graphics are an improvement. Where torches and campfires in the original seem to emit pale white moonlight, you get the expected warm glow from the new dynamic lighting, which I like, but it does make Sanctuary feel less otherworldly – perhaps something is lost there. And some of the new art lacks the character of the original pixelated renders: boulders that used to look like smooth ass cheeks now look like normal rocks, and once charmingly chunky wagons are now more sensibly-proportioned and covered with knick-knacks and details. Characters whose features were mostly implied are now sharply defined. A few pale pixels and a helmet of comic book red hair have been replaced with severe cheekbones and a styled auburn 'do. Some intrigue is lost.

I'M SPLIT ON WHETHER OR NOT THE NEW GRAPHICS ARE AN IMPROVEMENT.

PLAYED IT

DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

There are places where I like Resurrected's new art more, though. The first dungeon looks creepier in the new version. The Gargantuan Beasts, big yeti-like guys, are fabulous-looking. It's the same deal as with the human characters: they've been given detailed, shiny fur, as if someone's done a realistic render of a cartoon character, but instead of making them less intriguing the uncanny translation makes them weirder and cooler.

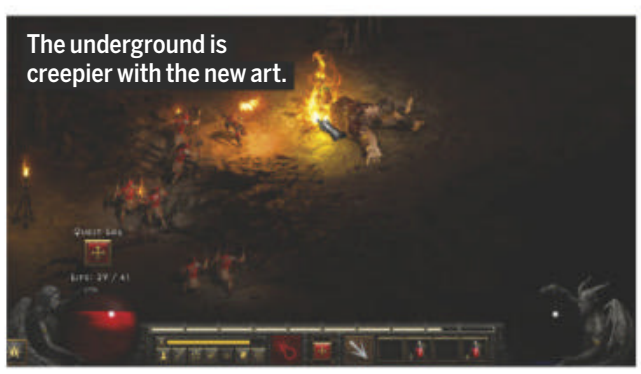
Playing it, I was surprised by how old Diablo II feels. It doesn't have a hotbar for attacks, for instance. At any given moment, you can have one action assigned to your left mouse button and one action assigned to your right mouse button. If you want to use more than two attacks or spells during a fight, you can assign keys (the top row function keys, by default) that change your mouse button bindings on the fly, or use the scroll wheel to cycle your right mouse button binding. The number keys are used for potions.

You get used to it. And as I played, I was reminded of how many little things Diablo II did so brilliantly. The sound effects remain top tier: the ping when you move a gem in your inventory, the gurgle when you drop a potion, the clink of falling gold. The menus are just about perfect, and it's nice to play a game that fits what you need to know into a few half-screens. Diablo II conformed snugly to the platform's limitations at the time, and that's an approach you don't see too much today, when limitations are things to overcome by adding more sub-menus.

Those new to Diablo II may find it too simple compared to the games it inspired – Destiny II, Path of Exile and so many others – but I can't wait to enjoy the simple fun of clicking on demons and finding magic swords. Hopefully the multiplayer support works well.

Tyler Wilde

Zoomed in, it barely looks like the same game.

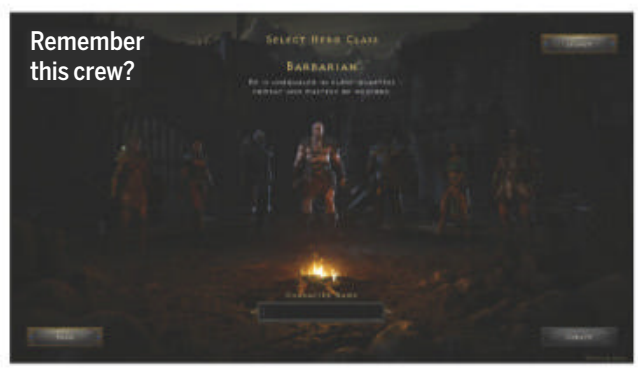


The underground is creepier with the new art.

The new graphics fill in all the details the old art just suggested.

Diablo II: Resurrected

The menus have lots of room at 1440p.



Remember this crew?

Demons come spilling out of an abyss called the Worldwound.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Summer	Owlcat Games	In-house	wrath.owlcatgames.com

PATHFINDER: WRATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS

A fantasy RPG split between two worlds

Back in 2018, Owlcat Games released *Pathfinder: Kingmaker*, a CRPG based on the popular tabletop game. It had some neat ideas, like building and managing your own kingdom, but paled in comparison to the likes of *Divinity* and *Pillars of Eternity*.

PLAYED IT

Fast forward to today and the developer is hoping to make up for the first game's shortcomings – and has managed to raise over US$2 million through crowdfunding to help them do it. Wrath of the Righteous expands on Kingmaker in every way, including the addition of Mythic Paths. These let you become, among other fantastic creatures, a Lich, Angel, Gold Dragon, or Demon, which will dramatically affect your character, how the story plays out, and how the world reacts to them.

But that all comes much later. First, you have to decide who you want to be. This is one of the deepest character creation systems I've seen in an RPG, with an overwhelming number of ways to shape your protagonist. If you're the kind of person who spends an hour creating your hero in games like Baldur's Gate, pour yourself a hot drink for this one. To kick things off, I choose the Cavalier class, who specialises in mounted combat – a new feature in Wrath of the Righteous.

BEAST MODE

I also choose the Beast Master subclass: a type of Cavalier who "spends his life in constant pursuit of the most perfect mount, forming bonds with greater, more powerful, and more exotic creatures". Beast Masters get class bonuses to Persuasion, Athletics, and Mobility, but they can't cast any spells. Because who needs spells when you're a master of beasts, right? Other classes available in the game include Barbarians, Hunters, and Bloodragers – a type of fearsome front-line fighter with a very metal name.

Then it's time to create my character's background. I decide he's a Wanderer. "Life is a path, not a destination," the in-game description reads "Your backpack is always ready and your feet are itching for the road, wherever it may lead." I like playing as drifters and loners in RPGs. Leaning into that, I also make him a Nomad – a kind of subclass – which gives me specialist knowledge of nature lore and my animal buddy a +3 hit point bonus. It also makes me proficient with scimitars, which is cool. Who doesn't love a scimitar?

Next up, stats. I select Charisma as my racial bonus, because I love sweet talkin' my way out of trouble in CRPGs. I give my Cavalier a lot of Strength, Constitution, Dexterity, and Charisma, but skimp on the Wisdom and Intelligence. Being a Nomad, I figure he probably hasn't spent much time hanging out in the library with dusty old wizards. For Feats, I add Alertness, which gives me a +2 bonus to Perception, and Endurance, which earns me a +2 bonus to Athletics – and lets me sleep in light or medium armour without becoming fatigued.

To finish things off I choose Atheism as my religion (or lack thereof), True Neutral as my alignment, and best of all, a velociraptor as my animal companion. Yes, there are dinosaurs in Wrath of the Righteous – some of which you can use as mounts and ride into battle. Why gallop around on a boring old horse when you can charge gloriously into the fray on the back of a prehistoric beast? Other mounts and animal companions include dogs, elk, mastodons, wolves, and smilodons – a prehistoric beast you probably know better as a sabre-toothed tiger.

With my character complete, I begin my adventure in Kenabres "a city poised on the border between two worlds". The setting in Wrath of the Righteous is split between the 'normal' world – a fairly »

THIS IS ONE OF THE DEEPEST CHARACTER CREATION SYSTEMS I'VE SEEN IN AN RPG.

Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous

The party explores a subterranean village.

You can set up a camp in the wilderness to heal your party.

I prefer real-time with pause combat. I'm old school like that.

Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous

Backgrounds are fully 3D rather than pre-rendered.

typical Tolkien-esque high fantasy setting – and the Worldwound, a freaky, demon-haunted wasteland teeming with all manner of unholy monsters and dark magic. A fair is taking place in Kenabres, but the festivities are interrupted by a battle between a giant insect-like demon and a dragon. Amid the chaos, the ground is torn apart and I fall into the crack.

BUG REPORT

Down in a spider-infested cavern lit by glowing blue mushrooms, I team up with a few other survivors of the attack on the fair and get a taste of one of WotR's many dungeons. The game features both turn-based and Infinity Engine-style real-time with pause combat – and you can switch between them on the fly, which is nice. The fighting is pretty standard for a CRPG, but the true depth of these games' combat systems doesn't fully reveal itself until you have a full party, a stuffed spellbook, and tougher enemies to battle.

As I explore the dungeon I find a magical sword imbued with heavenly light, which gives me the opportunity to start one of those Mythic Paths – specifically the Angel one. I accept. Later, deep in the caverns I find a subterranean village inhabited by demon-slaying crusaders who avoid the surface, preferring to dwell in the dark. Some of the adventurers in my party refer to them derisively as 'mongrels', while others seem to have more respect for them. I reveal my newfound heavenly powers to the chief and he weeps with joy. Some children have gone missing from the village, and he hopes that I'll be able to rescue them.

The children are being held in a place called the Shield Maze – which, lucky for me, is also a route back to the surface. By revealing my angelic powers to the chief, he's managed to recruit other clans in the depths to join their assault on the maze. I've become a beacon of hope for these people, it seems. It also turns out that the caverns were just an appetiser for the maze, which is a much bigger and more elaborate dungeon. I've been down here so long, I almost forgot I started in Kenabres. I'm not sure if a labyrinth of caves is the most impactful way to kick off an RPG, but I guess it worked for Oblivion.

I GO FULL ANGEL, UNLEASHING A BLAST OF HOLY ENERGY THAT KILLS THE DEMON.

Things get more interesting when I enter the Shield Maze, a candlelit medieval castle decorated with creepy stone gargoyles. Well, relatively. So far, the art in Wrath of the Righteous hasn't blown me away. Everything I've seen so far in this early beta, and in trailers released by the developer, has looked very fantasy-by-numbers. This is such a well-trodden genre, you really have to work to stand out, and I'm not feeling that here. Things might get more visually distinctive when I enter the Worldwound and see the demon-flavoured half of the setting, but so far I'm finding it all rather dull.

CRAWL AND SUNDRY

In the maze I encounter signs of strange rituals being performed, imp-like demons and underground warriors whose minds have been corrupted, turning them violent towards their former friends. I make my way through the dungeon, slaying beasts, looting chests, disarming traps, and finding keys to unlock doors and travel deeper inside. Reaching the deepest point, I find myself face to face with a demon: the source of all the strife in the maze and those kids disappearing. I'm given two options: unleash my heavenly power, doubling down on the Angel Mythic Path; or embrace the darkness and travel down the Demon path instead. I go full Angel, unleashing a blast of holy energy that kills the demon.

After about four hours in the gloom, I leave the Shield Maze behind and find myself back in Kenabres at last – but things aren't much better in the city, where a full-on demonic invasion is taking place. Overall, this introduction sequence does a fair job of establishing WotR's world and story, and giving you a flavour of the role-playing to come. But I'm a little underwhelmed. The game is deeply steeped in the worn-out old tropes of the genre, and nothing has grabbed me as particularly interesting or compelling yet as a result. I'm hoping things get more interesting later, because the CRPG is a genre I sincerely want to thrive on PC.

It's the Mythic Paths that I'm most intrigued by. Even with just a small taste of the Angel path, I can see it becoming something that could give this game an edge over others in the genre. There are eight of them in total, and I'll be interested to see how pursuing these paths impacts the story and your character's personality. Wrath of the Righteous is set for release in summer this year.

Andy Kelly

ALIVE & KICKING

Playing my first match in **BLOOD BOWL 3** – and surviving to tell the tale.

By Jody Macgregor

IT'S FIVE MINUTES INTO THE MATCH AND ALREADY WE'RE LAUGHING.

ames Workshop gave up on Blood Bowl for a long time. A fantasy football game for teams of 11 to 16, it was never going to move as many miniatures as wargames you have to buy entire armies for.

An official player committee was given the task of updating its living rulebook, which they did until 2009, when Cyanide released its first videogame version and essentially became the custodians of *Blood Bowl*. Cyanide organised tournaments online, created new teams like the heavily armoured Bretonnians and acrobatic bear-taming Kislev Circus, and helped keep *Blood Bowl* alive.

Today, Games Workshop is a different company, one with more time for hobbyist board games. The tabletop version of Blood Bowl was resurrected in 2016, and the rules overhauled in Second Season in 2020. Cyanide's videogames, once at the cutting edge, are now behind the ball, two editions out of date.

I GET KNOCKED DOWN

But not for long. While the board game fans have nicknamed Blood Bowl 2020 was being designed, Cyanide was consulting on the rules in preparation for eventually digitising them in *Blood Bowl 3*. "Their knowledge and passion for Blood Bowl is phenomenal," says Owen Rees, head of videogame licensing at Games Workshop, "and indeed sometimes in the past their questions whilst coding the game have helped us refine our FAQs. Outside of Games Workshop they are probably the foremost experts on the game!"

Basile Bastian, lead game designer at Cyanide, confirms the close relationship. "I remember the first draft," he says, "there was a lot of differences with the previous set of rules, and we give feedback. 'This rule is a little bit strange because it says quite the opposite ten pages after'. They help us and we help them to improve also. So that was a nice exchange."

To demonstrate the changes in *Blood Bowl 3*, Bastian has set up an online match in the current build, several months ahead of its planned August release. We're both playing new teams, him the Imperial Nobility (humans in fancy armour, loosely

ABOVE: Play the ball, not the orc.

LEFT: The emote wheel lets you display emotion without having to use your human voice.

replacing the Bretonnians), and me the Black Orcs (orcs with a little more skill than the regular kind, backed by goblins to do most of the fiddly ball-carrying).

On the first turn I make a safe move, which is to say I hit someone smaller than me. I pick a humie player with no friends around, and execute a block on him — rolling two dice and choosing the most favourable since I'm stronger. Each comes up with the same result: Both Down. That would normally mean both players take a fall, except he's got the Block skill which prevents Both Down results from applying to him. I elect to reroll, and get the exact same result. My orc hits the deck, and it's an immediate turnover. A perfect first turn for my first game of *Blood Bowl 3*.

So yes, *Blood Bowl 3* is still the same Blood Bowl in spite of any changes: a game that encourages you to prioritise actions with the least chance of failing, yet will still sometimes slap you in the face because the dice are nobody's friend.

Personally, I love the randomness. It's five minutes into the match and already we're laughing, as we will be again when Bastian commits a foul on one of my players (making the PR guy quietly watching us chide him for not going easy on me), and again when I push one of his players into the rabid crowd to be pummelled into unconsciousness, and again when one of my goblins scores a touchdown against the odds.

LEAGUE LEGENDS

Star players are cheaper now. So let's get to know a few of them

MORG 'N' THORG
Ogre with lots of trophies, including a medal for Services to Organ Transplants.

HAKFLEM SKUTTLESPIKE
Two-headed, four-armed skaven with the most Warhammer-y name ever.

GLORIEL SUMMERBLOOM
Elf thrower who's nice to people and believes in following the rules, which makes her a rarity.

KARLA VON KILL
Human, former pig farmer, runner up for most Warhammer-y name ever.

ZOLCATH THE ZOAT
Zoats are like if a centaur was green, six-legged, reptilian, and basically just not a centaur.

WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS

Though everything that makes it Blood Bowl remains in place, the rules have changed in plenty of ways. For instance, my troll has a new skill called projectile vomit, which I use to puke stomach acid all over Bastian's ogre. Everyone has the ability to jump over prone players, adding a little mobility. And you can use more than one reroll each turn.

Rerolls are a precious commodity. You have to put a lot of thought into committing more than one to a single manoeuvre. "Is it a good move?" asks Bastian. "Depends on the situation, of course, but it gives more elasticity to the system. I think it is a good thing for new players."

I've only got two rerolls per half, and if I use both in a single play it had better be for something worthwhile. A complicated multi-step play, for instance like having the troll pick up the goblin with the ball, first passing a Stupidity check as he has to before doing anything, then passing an Always Hungry

MY TROLL PUKES STOMACH ACID ALL OVER BASTIAN'S OGRE.

check to not eat the goblin, then a Passing test to accurately hurl the tiny doofus, who has to beat another roll just to survive the landing so he can scurry over the line.

That's four rolls in a row. More if the goblin has to dodge out of tackle zones after landing or sprint to go an extra square or two. It's not the kind of thing a team like the Black Orcs will try often when safer plays — like hitting people — are available. When the other team's down and bleeding, then we'll remember about goals and think about walking one in.

Other teams, those of the agile-and-fragile variety, need to spit in the face of probability on the regular. A simple change like being able to spend more than one reroll per turn could significantly change how they're played, making hail-mary risks more common. "Especially during the last turns of a drive," says Bastian, "I think it will occur during those kind of moments."

Other new rules bring a little more balance to Blood Bowl, though in typically chaotic ways. Teams with a lower value, perhaps because they've lost a few players to a bashy opponent in a previous game, can roll for 'Prayers to Nuffle' — the god of football violence whose name is 'NFL' as pronounced by someone who gets hit in the head for a living. Nuffle might open trapdoors on the pitch, grease someone's boots, or help you sneak a knife onto the field.

ABOVE: The troll can use a vomit attack, or just punch dudes.

FAR RIGHT: Player cards now show Agility and Passing (a new stat) as the numbers you have to roll over.

Special Play cards, fondly remembered from the board game's 1990s version, have returned to the tabletop game with similar effect. They're inducements available pre-match, when you're bribing the referee and hiring an extra healer. They let you draw from decks full of dirty tricks like "Look, a Distraction!" and magic items like Agrablag's Ball of Pain. Only some of them will be in *Blood Bowl 3*, Bastian tells me. "We have a bunch of special play cards for the launch of the game, not all of them directly at launch," he says.

BOWLED OVER *There have been more than three* Blood Bowl *videogames, but who's counting?*

BLOOD BOWL 1995
Published by MicroLeague. No way of telling players apart by looking at them. Largely forgotten.

CHAOS LEAGUE 2004
Cyanide's unlicensed game was so close to *Blood Bowl* Games Workshop took them to court.

BLOOD BOWL 2009
One amicable out-of-court settlement later, Cyanide was given a shot at an official videogame.

BLOOD BOWL: LEGENDARY EDITION 2010
Same game, but with more stadiums and teams.

BLOOD BOWL: CHAOS EDITION 2012
The same game again, but with more Chaos teams.

DUNGEONBOWL 2012
An expandalone with matches played in tunnels, which were a bit restrictive for football.

BLOOD BOWL 2 2015
Cyanide's sequel was less clunky, but also less complete, with new teams added as DLC.

DEATH ZONE 2018
A real-time *Blood Bowl* spin-off, so unpopular it was folded into *Blood Bowl 2* as free content.

Fingers crossed the Mutated Balls card makes it in.

THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

Though *Blood Bowl 2* looked nice enough, it had its limitations. Crowds made up of the same four people, smeared ground textures, a lack of variety in player models – not the kind of things that ruin a turn-based sports game, but very noticeable after some time.

Blood Bowl 3 may not have crowds of unique individuals in the stands, but it does a better job disguising that with waving pennants, extra statuary, cooking fires, and water features placed around the stadium. There's even a camera goblin balancing on a barrel in the pond.

We're playing on the Imperial Nobility's home ground, rough grey astrogranite that highlights spilled blood nicely, one of 12 pitches ("some of them with new game rules") in *Blood Bowl 3*.

The players look a little less copy-pasted. My orcs have different arrays of tusks attached to their faces and patterns on their shoulderpads, and while one of my goblins wears knuckledusters and a beaky helmet, another has spiked elbow pads and a faceguard impressively shaped like a toothy metal mouth. "We have improved the visuals," Bastian says, "we based our artistic vision on the figurines."

More customisation options help with that. An orc doesn't just get to choose from a handful of preset heads, but from separate helmets, shoulder pads, body armour, arm guards (left and right separately), and an overall level of spiky bits, as well as different colours for each. It's closer to painting a miniature, without having to worry about mucking up the eyes.

THERE WILL BE BLOOD

Your personalised designs get highlighted in snappy cinematics where you see your perfect beautiful creation get slammed into the ground by an ogre. They've been abbreviated from the overlong cinematics in *Blood Bowl 2*, but I recognise the Noble Blitzer using the same attack the Bretonnian Blitzers used to.

"We created a new bunch of animations, especially for the new factions," Bastian says, "and others are reused from the previous ones. We kept the best ones from *Blood Bowl 2*." I'm not sure this sideways uppercut is one I'd keep, but perhaps I'm salty because I'm watching it lift my guy into the air.

All this is overseen by a coach, now represented next to the dugout. Bastian's coach is wearing an elaborate winged headpiece, mine has half a dead ghoul nailed to his shoulder. The coaches also appear in pop-ups when you choose an emote, of which there are six: despair, celebration, incitement, tease, kill us, and explosion. Six perfectly normal emotional responses. I'm feeling a bit

explosion today. The coaches aren't just for show, though. "If the foul action is made and the referee has seen it you can try to use the coach to tell him no," Bastian explains. There's a chance your coach's argument will earn your player a reprieve. Bastian helpfully demonstrates this system by kicking a half-dead goblin while it's down.

There's space for assistant coaches and cheerleaders on the sides of the field as well. "Each faction has its own cheerleader," Bastian says, "visually different, and the dances are different. It was a huge request from the community because it was the case in *Blood Bowl 1*, but not in *Blood Bowl 2*."

Of the handful of cheerleader options in *Blood Bowl 2*, the orcs with weighted nipple tassels were difficult to forget about. Cyanide has to run its designs by Games Workshop to get validated and were surprised to receive a yes on that one, so I'm told they've submitted some wild designs for *Blood Bowl 3*.

SPLATTERMANIA

The tabletop return of Blood Bowl was bittersweet for people who got into it immediately before lockdown. "Unlike the tabletop version the digital version obviously allows for players to play with people they're not physically with," says Rees. "Also it brings in new players who may not be aware of the tabletop version so we see it as complimentary for those that love the tabletop version, rather than an alternative."

For those who prefer a singleplayer experience, *Blood Bowl 3* has a story campaign that won't force you to play vanilla humans like *Blood Bowl 2* did. "You can create a skaven team for example and play with this skaven team all the campaign," Bastian says. "Now the campaign is divided into chapters and each chapter is a specific competition, which has specific challenges to beat." Your custom team doesn't have to end their story there, either. "You can play the team you have created during all the campaign, and after that play the same team in multiplayer."

Sounds grand, but singleplayer won't count for much without an AI that puts up a bit of a fight, and the AI in *Blood Bowl 2* was a cakewalk even on hard difficulty mode, unless you handicapped yourself with a low-tier team. When I ask Bastian whether this will be improved he explains the AI is being programmed "to be more offensive than before, and it will try also to create some configurations with its players". He loses some of my confidence when the first configuration he mentions is a cage to protect the ball-carrier, something the AI already relies on too much in *Blood Bowl 2*, rarely passing or running even when there aren't enough turns left to score any other way.

BLOOD BOWL 3 HAS A STORY CAMPAIGN THAT WON'T FORCE YOU TO PLAY VANILLA HUMANS.

OVER THE YEARS *A timeline of the different versions of Blood Bowl*

1986
1st edition. Adapted from Warhammer Fantasy Battle – a skirmish wargame with a ball.

1988
2nd edition. Introduced Dungeonbowl, an underground version of the sport.

1991
Kerrunch. A spin-off aimed at beginners, with simpler rules

1994
Third edition. Introduced the turnover rule, became recognisably Blood Bowl.

2001
Living rulebook. A free PDF annually updated, the rules previous videogames used.

2011
Blood Bowl: Team Manager. A card game – basically Football Manager with orcs.

2016
Blood Bowl 2016. The rules didn't change much, but it was a board game again.

2020
Blood Bowl Second Season. Rewrote the rules to help new players, nerfed wood elves.

Bastian assures me that "near the end of a drive she will try to do more ... in order to complete a touchdown" and "she will be more aggressive about trying to do more fouls", which would be an improvement.

Since I didn't get to try the singleplayer, I can only hope *Blood Bowl 3* can pit you against computer-controlled teams that know how to play it. Everything else Bastian says is encouraging. He explains that we'll be able to make leagues that mix player and AI teams, and decide whether players are allowed a pool of bonus turn time (another nice touch for beginners). The menus are being redesigned, and you'll be able to see all your players and any competitions you're managing more easily.

A detail that matters to me: *Blood Bowl 3* lets you rename players at any time, not just when hired. I'm from the *XCOM* school of nominative reward, where they earn nicknames by living long enough to distinguish themselves, or die anonymous. The same applies to elves and goblins, whose survival odds are about the same as *XCOM* squaddies.

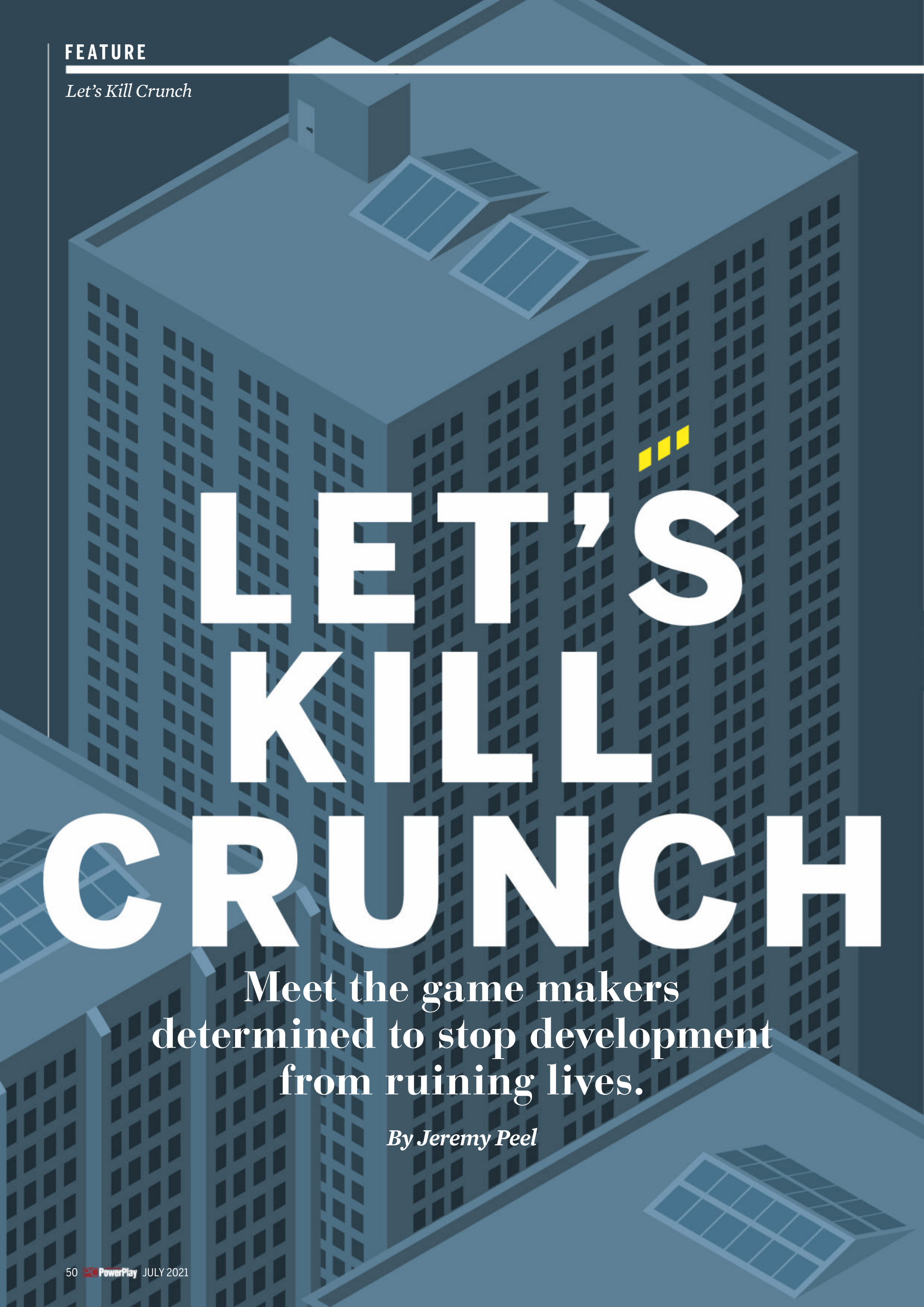
BUT I GET UP AGAIN

Surviving against the odds is what Blood Bowl is all about, and the game's production embodies its theme. The first edition in 1986 was seemingly produced on a whim, and after the third edition Games Workshop abandoned it for 20 years. A game of Blood Bowl is full of surprises, but it's just as surprising the game still exists.

"In retrospect the idea of fantasy races playing a contemporary-style sports game was a crazy idea to have in the 1980s," admits Rees, "but it clearly struck a chord and the cheeky irreverence but recognisable structure just work really well together. Who doesn't like a referee you can bribe, players with chainsaws, or an ogre throwing a goblin down the field to score a touchdown?" ■

TOP: The referee seems like a trustworthy sort. He's got an unbribable face.

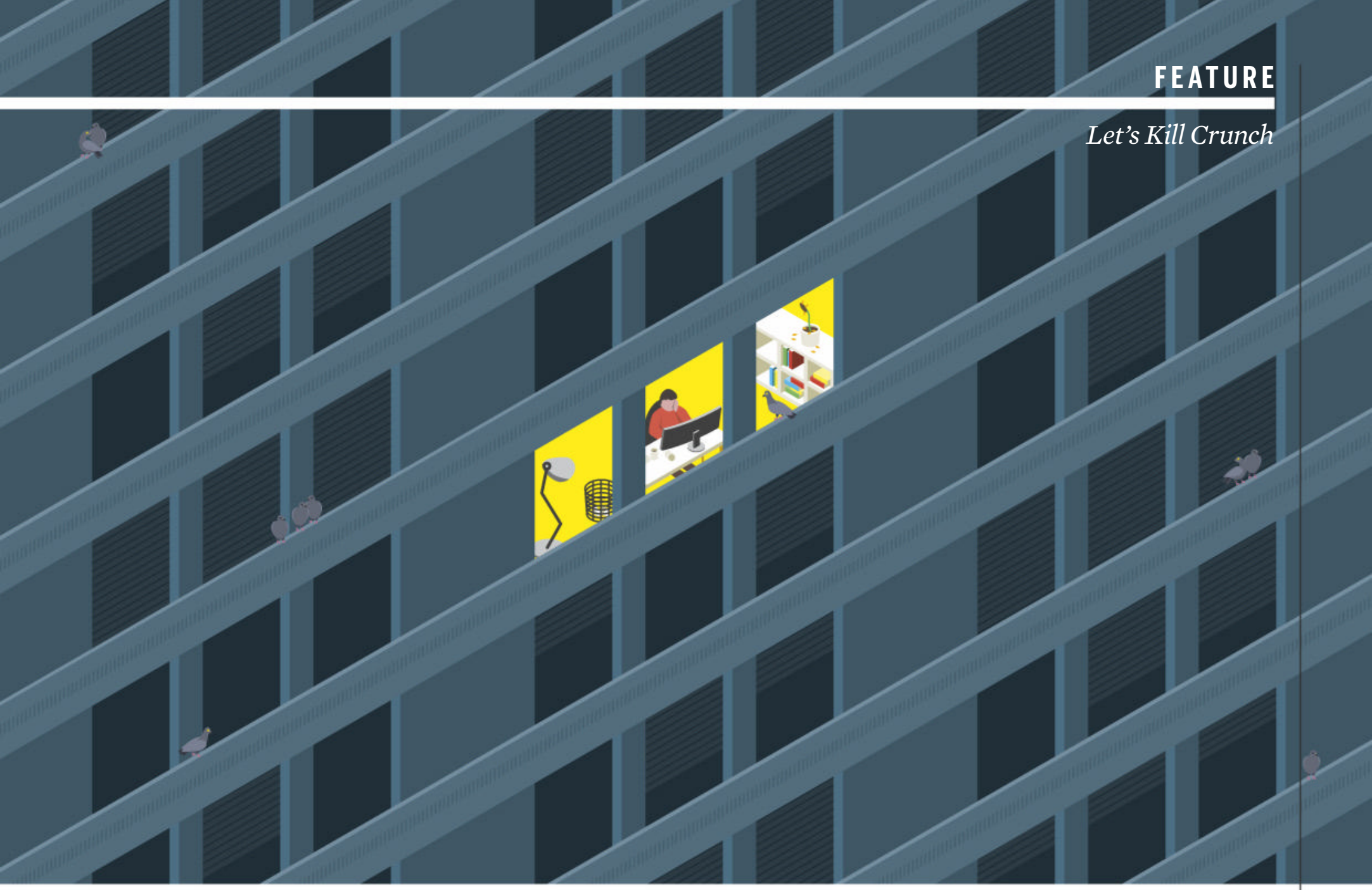
FAR LEFT: They think it's all ogre...



LET'S KILL CRUNCH

Meet the game makers determined to stop development from ruining lives.

By Jeremy Peel



The games industry never stood a chance. Raphael van Lierop, narrative director of *Far Cry 3*, believes the medium inherited crunch from its parent industries – the expectation of overwork baked into software and filmmaking long before a programmer first managed to steer a pixel across a screen. By the time van Lierop joined a game studio in the early 2000s, burnout was considered best practice.

"We didn't at all associate these things with poor management or poor planning practices," van Lierop says. "We believed crunch was a necessary prerequisite to creating something exceptional."

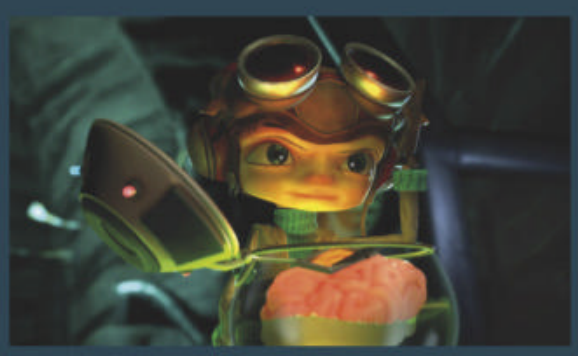
It was only after a dozen years of 70 to 80 hour weeks, as van Lierop found himself putting his kids to bed only to turn around and drive back to the office, that he recognised an unhealthy spiral. "I recall a night in particular during a really heavy crunch period, my wife looking over my shoulder and reflecting that she didn't understand why I was making so many personal sacrifices for something that didn't feel that much like 'me,'" he says. "I realised I'd never stopped to ask myself if this was something I'd wanted. Shortly after that game shipped I decided that I would never go back to another AAA studio, and Hinterland was largely born from that decision."

Hinterland, which develops top-rated Steam survival game *The Long Dark*, is part of a new wave of studios dedicated to ending crunch. Though divided by continents, cultures and genres, they face shared problems – and offer a glimmer of hope that the rest of the industry can one day find similar solutions.

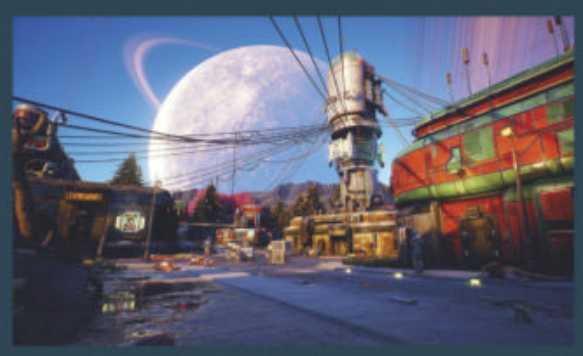
BAD ROMANCE

Overwork is not exclusive to AAA studios. Famously, *Stardew Valley* developer Eric Barone spent four years in self-imposed crunch – averaging ten hours a day, seven days a week. "We still really »

TRIPLE YAY *The big-budget studios changing things for the better.*



DOUBLE FINE
Tim Schaefer has committed to finishing *Psychonauts 2* without crunch, and new owner Microsoft has backed him.

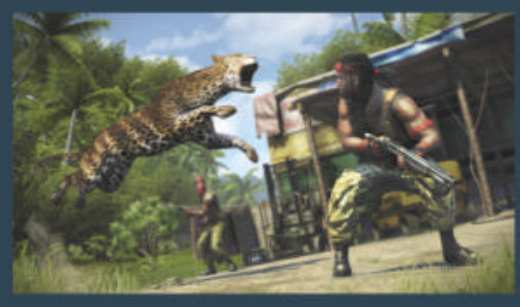


OBSIDIAN
'Death marches' are rare at the venerable RPG studio, which explains how it's kept hold of its core of veteran staff for such a long time.

BUNGIE
Halo 2's brutal development led the developer to change its ways. *Destiny 2* was made without enforced crunch, and holiday time is now mandatory.

LEFT: "It's just games," Nijman says. "Work shouldn't have to be like this."

RIGHT: AAA projects are complex, says van Lierop, and therefore mistakes have a high cost.



romanticise the solo dev working in their basement for years who shipped a huge hit," van Lierop says. "The games press plays a big role in this. The issue is that for every single indie hit that was made under those extreme conditions, 100 or 1,000 failed miserably and those developers ruined their health, their finances, and their relationships chasing a false dream."

For Vlambeer, the two-man team behind *Nuclear Throne* and *Luftrausers*, the dream was realised – but designer Jan Willem Nijman nonetheless regrets the damage done during the process.

"I burnt out a few times," he says. "The launch of *Nuclear Throne* was a major one. Recovery means not working for an extended period of time, being a barely functioning human, and then many months, if not years, to slowly get back to normal. On top of that, I lost some of my 'elasticity' – I can't push myself remotely as far anymore without quickly burning out again."

More recently, during the development of *Minit* and *Disc Room* – two critically-acclaimed games Nijman made with a variety of collaborators for Devolver Digital – he took care to prioritise life over work. "If it needs more time, it needs more time," he says. "If it means that the game needs to be a bit smaller, that's also fine. For us, making things leisurely is just as fast as making them under stress. In fact, I am convinced that by living a fuller life you can be more creative and are more open to inspiration."

"FOR US, MAKING THINGS LEISURELY IS JUST AS FAST AS MAKING THEM UNDER STRESS."

AUROCH & A HARD PLACE

But what happens when the scope and timeline of your game is decided by an outside force, like a publisher? It's often midsized studios that are trapped in the vice – accepting high-pressure projects in order to make payroll. Auroch Digital, which now makes the space agency strategy game *Mars Horizon*, spent several years bouncing between tabletop-related games like *Chainsaw Warrior*, *Ogre* and *Achtung! Cthulhu Tactics*. In its early days, developers weren't consulted when deals were made.

"The first two projects that I worked on were disasters, from a production point of view," partnership and production manager Nina Collins explains to me. "The team would have a contract put in front of them saying 'We're making this game in 12 months, for this much money'. Both of those projects were very much firefighting, and that's what led to them having crunch – we had overpromised on quality, on scope, and we didn't have enough time or budget. That was when, as a company, we said 'This isn't sustainable.'"

In the years that followed, Auroch started tracking the time staffers spent on tasks, in and out of normal working hours. "What you get with that data is the hidden work," creative producer Peter Willington says. "And if you can't track the hidden work, how in the hell can you make good estimates for future projects? Production is something that happens before you've signed the contract."

Beyond making more sensible promises to publishers, Auroch now schedules its weeks differently too – planning work for only four days out of five, leaving extra time for meetings. "You try and pull developers who are under pressure and crunching into a discussion," Collins says. "Their stress levels go to

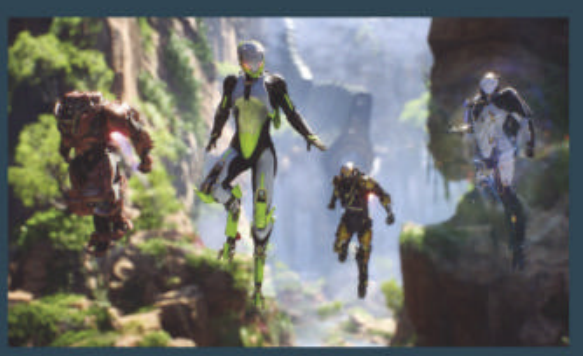
DARK AGES *The most notorious examples of games industry crunch.*

EA SPOUSE

"My happy, supportive smile is running out." The 2004 open letter from the anonymous partner of a game dev triggered multiple lawsuits against EA.

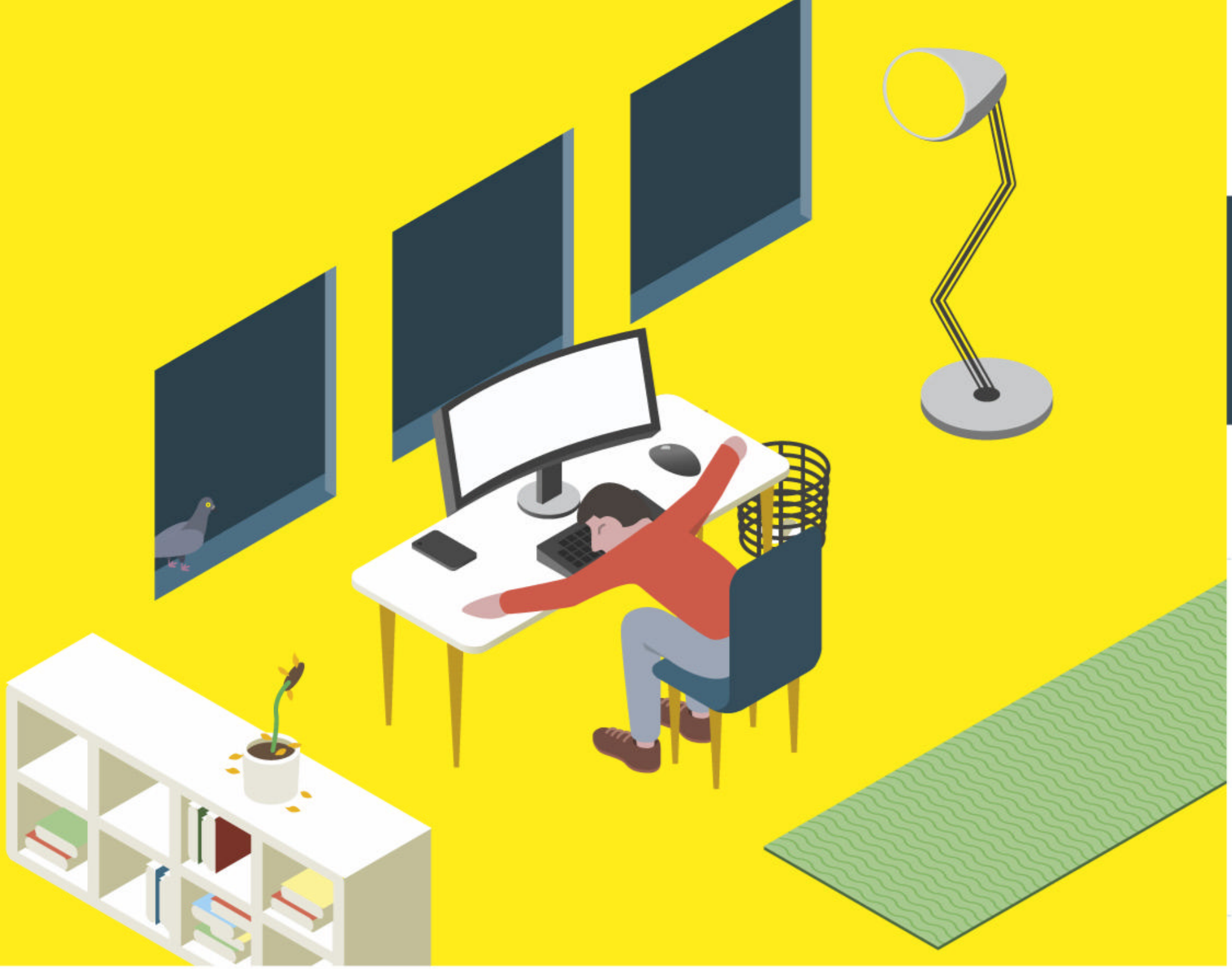
ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO

The *Red Dead Redemption* studio was the subject of a similar letter six years later, which detailed mismanagement and overwork.



BIOWARE'S ANTHEM

A Kotaku report said many staff had taken doctor-mandated stress leave after working on the doomed jetpack shooter.



the max. And the problem is that they don't view meetings as part of development. And in that meeting, as a group, you might find out that you can cut 20 days off the AI."

Willington knew these measures were working when, on launch day for *Dark Future: Blood Red States*, the team was finished coding by lunchtime – early enough to pass around a bottle of whisky. "I was very emotional about that," he says. "That was the pivot point."

LATE NIGHT CHAT

Beating crunch takes soft skills as well as spreadsheets, however. As soon as Mike Bithell made enough money to start employing people, he pledged that they wouldn't crunch. But sticking to that principle has meant actively catching staff in the act of working too hard.

"Still to this day, I have to check if they're working late," the *John Wick Hex* director told me at Yorkshire Games Festival last year. "They've worked in environments where that's expected of them, or often they just really love their job. They'll think that's the way to get into my good books to get a promotion or a pay rise. It's my job as a boss to keep reminding people that it's not how they impress me."

Auroch has encountered the same problem. "No matter how many times we tell people that we are anti-crunch, when they're first starting a new job, people still feel like they're trying to prove themselves," Collins says. "It's proving themselves in the wrong way – because there's historic stuff from the industry. And it's really important to stop people doing that, because they're going to run themselves into the ground doing something that's completely unnecessary."

Traditionally, many game studios have presented crunch as optional – but the consequences of opting out have been severe. "It was never explicitly stated, but I think everyone knew that the 'nine to fivers' were not the ones that would get the good promotions, because they couldn't possibly be that dedicated or ambitious," van Lierop says. "What I want to hear from studio leaders is, they never have to talk to their staff about work-life balance or having healthy work habits because they all know it's expected of them. At Hinterland, if we have to remind team members not to work too hard, it's a failure of our leadership." Nijman believes it's important to lead by doing. "If you're the boss who's working late hours, you're just overburdening yourself and setting an unhealthy example."

BOSS FIGHT

It's this last point that has proven tricky to put into practice at some of the studios I've spoken to. Somewhat hypocritically, Bithell still works overtime, a fact his staff have called him out on. "We had a postmortem after we released *John Wick*, and the biggest piece of feedback from my entire team was 'Mike works too hard,'" he says. It's an issue Bithell Games is addressing by bringing in extra producers.

"That's one of our objectives as a company," he says. "We may never get my hours down fully, but that's OK because I get to own the company. I get my name on the fucking front of the game. It's a very different thing when you're an employee, being paid hourly, and I can't ask for the same degree of devotion."

Auroch's last two games involved no crunch at all, but some senior staff do still put in the extra time. "We've had someone start that will hopefully spread that out," Collins says. "There's always more to be done, but we can proudly say we do not do crunch."

At Hinterland, members of the team have crunched on three

18+

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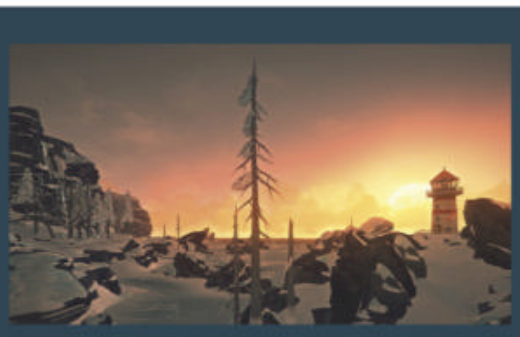


> **"ALL THE DATA WE HAVE ON IT SAYS IT DEMOLISHES SOMEONE'S ABILITY TO PRODUCE WORK."**

occasions: once to get *The Long Dark* through Xbox certification before reveal at E3; once to fix PS4 technical issues before the game hit 1.0; and once to get overhauled story episodes out before Christmas of 2018.

"It's no coincidence that these three instances all occurred around fixed external milestones," van Lierop says. "Timing commitments we'd made to our partners or our players that we felt we couldn't break. Our solution since has been to avoid making public commitments like that, and as much as possible to avoid lining up significant launches of new content with new platforms."

QUALITY OF LIFE

It's notable that *The Long Dark*, *Mars Horizon*, *Minit*, and *Disc Room* are all reviewed as 'Very Positive' on Steam – the highest honour in the field of player satisfaction. Developers may worry that forgoing crunch will lead to unfinished games, disappointed critics, or frustrated fans waiting for updates. But all of the developers interviewed for this article believe their games have turned out better since turning their backs on overwork.

"The first game I worked on [at Auroch] turned out fine, but no one was like 'This is great,'" Willington says. "We're making our best looking, best playing games since we stopped doing this stuff."

"Even if you're a cynic, crunch is a bad idea," Bithell says. "All the data we have on it says it demolishes someone's ability to produce work. It's really just common sense. You have to understand what the biological limitations of being a human being are. You can't work crazy hours, and the research all backs up that position."

"It's generally understood that work done under extended crunch conditions is often not good or high-quality work," van Lierop explains. "Why would you want that? You're burning your people out to get worse results and eventually lose them, which just puts more burden on the next batch. I don't think the results are compromised by avoiding crunch. I think they are definitely compromised by depending on crunch to get your games out the door."

BLOOD DIAMONDS

The question, then, isn't whether avoiding crunch works. It's whether the rest of the industry will follow suit. Bithell's established reputation allows him to stand up for his team in publisher negotiations, while Auroch's cashflow means it can afford to delay milestones – both privileges that a new indie team may not have at their disposal.

Larger developers, meanwhile, have less incentive to end crunch. "They can pull in another coder that's just as good," Collins says. "We couldn't afford to lose those people, so we had to sort it out." What's more, AAA studios are often beholden to shareholders – who can

LEFT: Bithell's breakthrough hit *Thomas Was Alone* was made purely in his evenings and weekends.

RIGHT: *Volume* is an underrated Bithell Games stealth sim.

be much less understanding than players. "Hitting quarterly revenue targets becomes the measure of business health, versus the health of the teams or the quality of the products," van Lierop says.

But, as we've seen before, players can influence whether or not developers ruin their health and home lives, even at the highest levels – by voting with their wallets. "What we need in games is more of a 'blood diamonds' concept – societal pressure that acknowledges the human cost of a product should be part of how we measure its value," van Lierop says. "Until consumer sentiment changes and people stop buying games made under unhealthy working conditions, nothing will fundamentally change around crunch."

"Even if it would make no difference for the final product, the fact that it makes people unhappy, unhealthy, and takes so much time off their lives is more than enough reason to end the whole practice once and for all," Nijman says. "Instead of saying 'Not destroying the Amazon Rainforest is good for the economy,' people need to realise that we shouldn't be destroying the Amazon anyway."

Play *Minit* today, and you'll find it filled with places and people the team encountered while out living their lives, not staring into a monitor. "Spending time not working is important to fuel that," Nijman explains. "There's a quote floating around somewhere that there are two types of poets: those who try, try, try and squeeze and eventually get their words on the page, and those who live life and sometimes poetry happens. I want to keep designing games like that second group of poets."

FREE-RANGE GAMES *The best work of the devs we interviewed.*

MARS HORIZON

Basically your own NASA control room. Auroch's management sim is friendlier than *Kerbal* but deeper than space itself.

MINIT

In this *Zelda*-like adventure, your lives last only 60 seconds. It's a typically intense and giddy concept from Vlambeer's Jan Willem Nijman.

THE LONG DARK

"Your endless struggle to keep the Grim Reaper at arm's length is enormously rewarding," said PC Gamer's Andy Kelly of Hinterland's chilly survival game.

JOHN WICK HEX

Put together with the input of Hollywood fight choreographers, this is turn-based tactics at its most stylish.

The Lord of the Rings: Gollum

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2022	Daedalic	In-house	daedalic.com

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: GOLLUM

A familiar story from a different perspective.

An air of mystery has surrounded *The Lord of the Rings: Gollum* ever since it was announced by Daedalic back in March 2019. The studio has outlined its grand vision for the game: to tell the story of the destruction of the One Ring from the perspective of Gollum, rather than the Fellowship.

But now, finally, I get to see the game in action, and get a sense of how it might actually *play*. Alas, it's a hands-off demo, and the developer playing it says the build is ten months old. So I'm not getting a totally accurate picture of what the finished game will be like.

Gollum has been imprisoned in Barad-dûr, the colossal tower built by Sauron in the fiery heart of Mordor. The Dark Lord's stronghold looks *massive* from the perspective of the diminutive former hobbit. Luckily he's an expert climber.

FIRST LOOK

The developer controlling the demo notes that Gollum has been clambering around Middle-earth for around 500 years, and has developed superhuman strength and climbing skills as a result.

He can run on walls, swing on poles, slide down cliffs, and crawl up certain surfaces. He may be a wretched monster tormented by the power of the One Ring, but he's very nimble on his feet.

In the build I'm shown, Gollum's animations are in pretty rough shape. I watch him scramble around Barad-dûr, and it feels very... *placeholder*. There are no smooth transitions between his various states – running, climbing and swinging – which makes it look stiff and robotic.

GOLLUM IS NOT A FIGHTER, SO STEALTH PLAYS A PROMINENT ROLE IN THE GAME.

Gollum is trying to reach the immense gate that leads out of the tower. There's no map screen or minimap in the game, so you have to pay close attention to the environment to find a way your way there. At one point Gollum acquires a hand-drawn map scribbled by an orc, but as you might expect, it's not that easy to read.

The scale and detail of the tower is impressive. It's all jagged obsidian spires and snaking rivers of bubbling lava, which is exactly the kind of interior decoration you'd expect from an edgelord like Sauron.

Daedalic says its approach to level design in the game will give players a lot of freedom. There will, apparently, be multiple ways to get through an area, which I get a sense of as I see Gollum picking a route through Barad-dûr.

Gollum is not a fighter, meaning stealth plays a prominent role in the game. Another of his abilities is having a keen sense of hearing – especially in the dark.

MY PRECIOUS

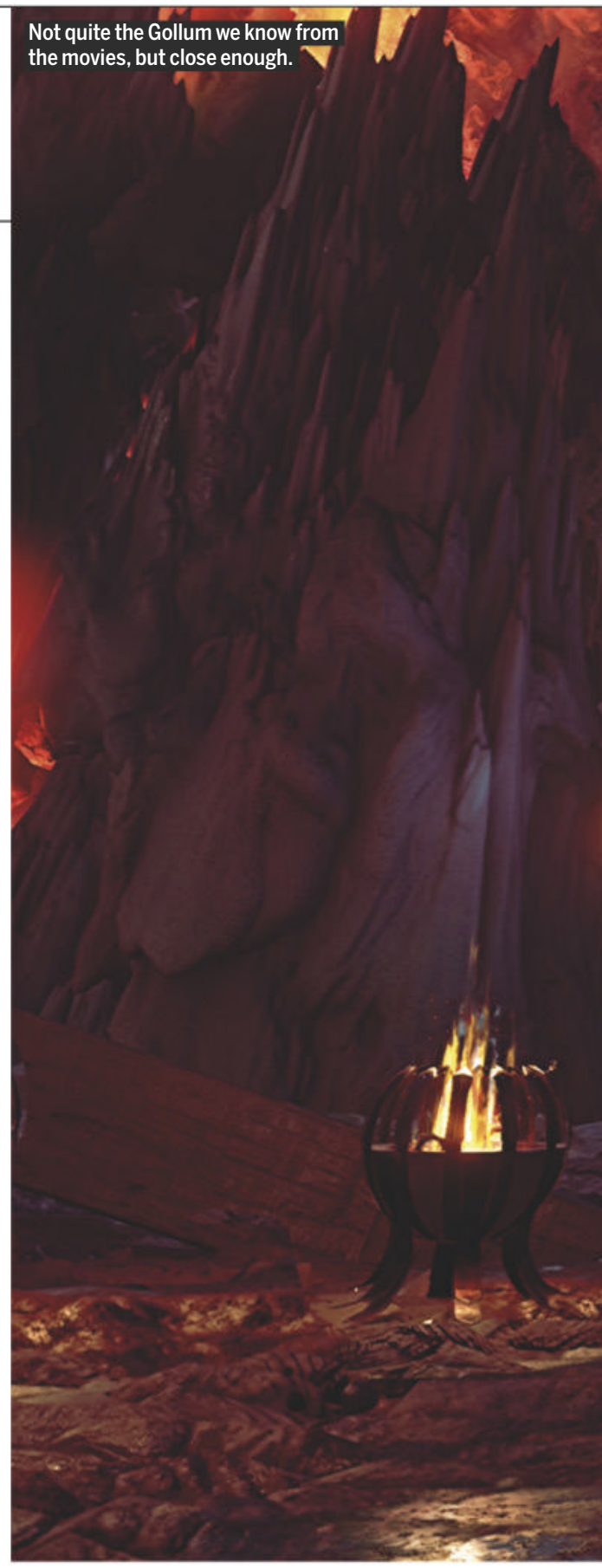
This wasn't implemented in the demo I saw, but in the finished game you'll be able to *see* sounds, helping you find enemies and predict their movements. If you manage to isolate a lone orc, Gollum can knock them out – but this takes a long time and generates a lot of noise.

One of the most interesting things about Gollum is the raging internal battle between his current self and Sméagol, the hobbit he used to be before the ring polluted his mind. At certain points in the game you're forced to make a choice, deciding whether to react to something as the violent, bitter, duplicitous Gollum, or the meek, kindly Sméagol.

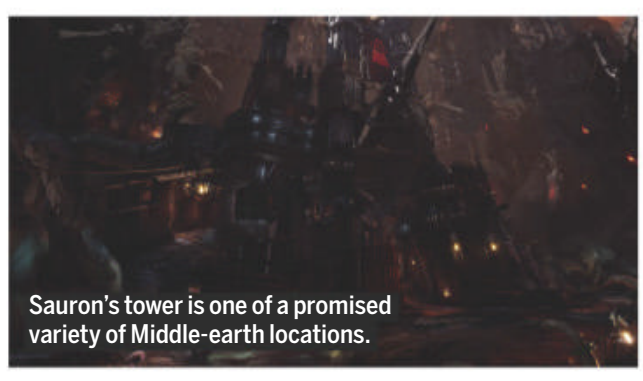
It's an intriguing concept, but I was thrown off a bit by the portrayal of the character. This game is based purely on the books – as a fan of the films I struggled a bit with hearing someone other than Serkis performing the role.

That's gonna take some getting used to. But Daedalic has promised that it will remain faithful to the source material, which means we might not see anything as egregious as *Shadow of War*'s bizarrely sexy Shelob here.

Andy Kelly



Not quite the Gollum we know from the movies, but close enough.



Sauron's tower is one of a promised variety of Middle-earth locations.

Daedalic is promising multiple paths through the levels.

Gollum has a bad habit of annoying giant magical spiders.

Age of Empires 4

Riding an elephant has to be way more fun than manning the wall.

Love the fort within the fort as this civilisation grew.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Spring 2021	Relic Entertainment	Microsoft	ageofempires.com

AGE OF EMPIRES 4

Adding a new dimension to wargaming.

I mean it as a compliment when I say *Age of Empires 4* looks like *Age of Empires 2*. It's 20 years newer and 3D instead of 2D, but the blue splotches on buildings and the peasants working the fields catapult me back to my obsession with building armies of Teutonic knights who lumbered across the battlefield like better-dressed Terminators.

"We knew we wanted to make a modern version of *Age*, but we also wanted to make a game that felt like *Age of Empires* and would be immediately relatable to the core community," game director Quinn Duffy said at a roundtable, where the *AOE 4* team talked about the game in-depth for the first time. I only got a relatively brief look of *Age of Empires 4* in motion, but that was enough to pick up on how many changes can be called *modern*.

The terrain is gorgeous and takes full advantage of being 3D with dramatic cliffs and hills that will give an advantage in combat. Units in each civilisation now speak their own native language and their audio will change from one age to the next. The whole world will even become more vibrant and saturated as you progress out of the dark ages and approach the Renaissance.

Though there are still generic units shared between factions, retaining the triangle of cavalry, ranged units, and pikemen, civilisations are now more asymmetric. The Mongols, for example, can pack up all their buildings and move them, something the English aren't going to do with a stone castle. During the roundtable I also got quick looks at the Chinese and Delhi Sultanate, the other two confirmed civilisations.

"So much time has passed and other strategy games have evolved and iterated how RTS works," said franchise creative director Adam Isgreen. He pointed to some major additions in *Age 4*, like units being able to hide in forests to pull off ambushes and wall combat that makes city assaults feel suitably dramatic.

Don't like your city layout? Just pack up the tents and move elsewhere.

THE TERRAIN IS GORGEOUS AND TAKES FULL ADVANTAGE OF BEING 3D

NEW AGE

After spending much of the last decade playing games in the *Total War* series, though, *Age of Empires 4* still looks like a throwback to me. A unit of pikemen looks like three men instead of one hundred, and cavalry seem to gallop up to an infantry line instead of crushing through it in a realistic show of physics. *Total War*'s combat definitely leans towards simulation, but outside of battles it's missing most of what makes *Age of Empires* so fun: creating a city building-by-building and encircling it with an immense wall, or sending scouts into enemy camps to torment their peasants.

NEW INFO

The asymmetry between civilisations tantalises me the most. Civs will get bonuses for building cities and landmarks on top of tweaks to systems like trade, research, and production. And then there are the unique features and units, like the Sultanate's war elephants. Where the English are meant to be cozy and familiar, the Mongols and some yet-to-be-named Civs "really push the boundaries of what *Age of Empires* has done before," said Isgreen.

Age of Empires 4's four planned campaigns also sound ambitious: instead of focusing on individual historical figures they'll tackle a longer view of the civilisation's history. The Norman campaign begins with William the Conqueror, then moves to the conflict between his children Henry I and Robert II, and then their children, through to the signing of the Magna Carta a century later.

Four years after it was announced, *Age of Empires 4* is finally out in autumn 2021, but it should be playable sooner – a closed beta is on the way before launch.

Wes Fenlon

Gamedec

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
September 16	Anshar Studios	In-house	gamedec.com

GAMEDEC

Solve crimes as a virtual Sherlock Holmes

This isometric RPG has a neat premise. You're a private detective solving cases in virtual worlds. A game detective, if you will. You know, a... *gamedec*? It's a terrible name, but the concept of diving into simulated worlds and solving crimes is a strong one.

Set in Warsaw in the 22nd century, virtual reality has become so convincing that people rarely spend time in the increasingly grim, dystopian real world. And who can blame them? In this dark cyberpunk future, life sucks, which has contributed to the sheer popularity of VR.

But the problem with spending all day hanging out in virtual worlds where there are no real consequences is that it tends to bring out the worst in humanity. I mean, play any popular online game today for more than ten minutes and this isn't hard to imagine.

As a result, crime has become an issue, to the point where cybercops like you have to be brought in. You create your own detective, using abilities and professions to determine what kind of super sleuth you'll be.

Some of the crimes you investigate happen on the rain-soaked streets of Warsaw, but you'll also be able to venture into virtual worlds too. These include a seedy 21st century city where people role-play, *GTA*-style, as criminals.

I played a demo of *Gamedec*, set in a tiny, closed off crime scene somewhere in the depths of Neo Warsaw. It presents only a minuscule fraction of what the final game will offer, with a lot of dialogue options, decisions and menus locked off.

But I did get a bit of a taste of the game's detective systems. A man with a pair of holographic bat wings is lying dead on the rain-slicked pavement, seemingly shot out of the sky by an automated drone the city uses to kill vermin.

Refreshingly, there's no combat in *Gamedec* – although you can still die, albeit temporarily until whichever VR world you're in respawns you. This is a game about conversations, investigation, and piecing together clues to paint a picture of the truth.

FULL DEC

I get a sense of this as I explore the crime scene, interrogating witnesses, hacking CCTV cameras and drones, and using my detective skills – in the form of classic RPG skill rolls – to root out hidden clues. These clues are then added to a codex that you can access, linking them together to make deductions. You're given several conclusions, and must create a path towards the correct one (or what you *think* is the correct one) by linking clues to it.

PLAYED IT

As I explore the crime scene I learn a few things that add weight to the theory that the victim was shot down by one of those anti-vermin drones. Apparently giant fruit bats are a problem in this future Warsaw, and it seems the drone may have mistaken the dead man for one as he fell from above with those wings on. But there are other clues suggesting it might actually be a murder. The best detective stories throw up a lot of intriguing questions, and *Gamedec* does a decent job of making me want to find answers to them.

As a fan of detective games, in theory I should be pretty excited about *Gamedec*. But I'm not there yet. The investigation mechanics are sound, but the writing is not great. It feels flat and amateurish, and the future slang ('gamedec' being a prime example) comes across very forced.

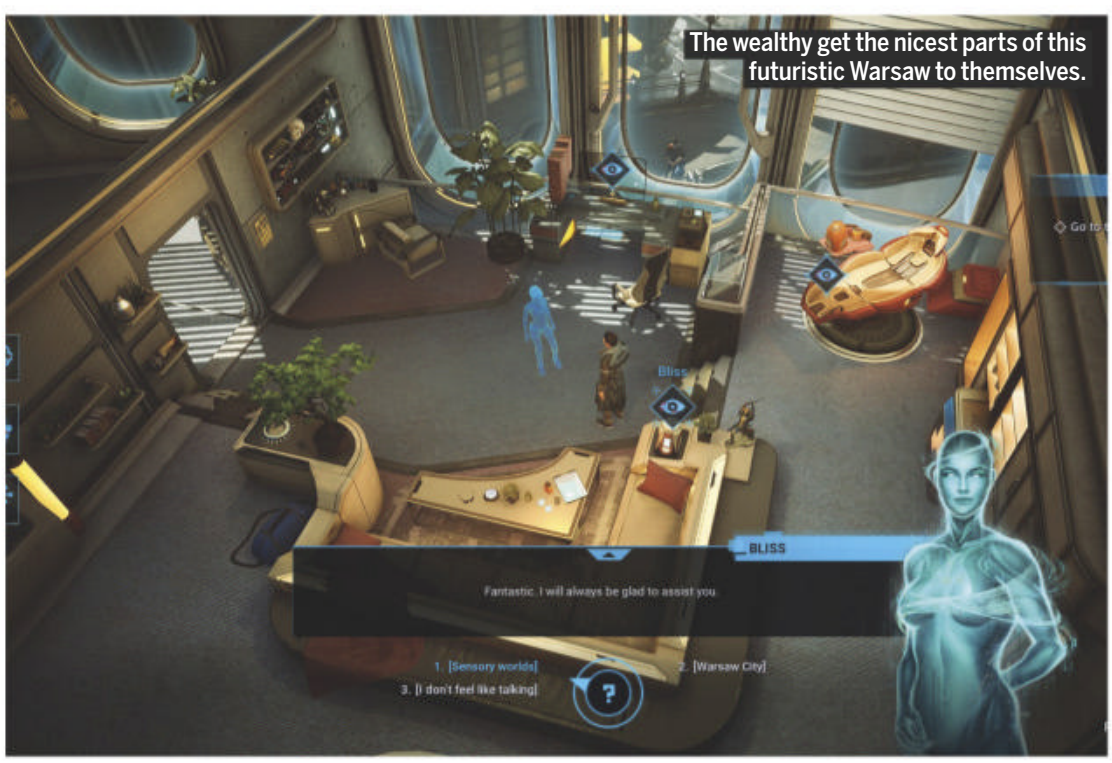
Of course, for any detective game, it all really boils down to the quality of the cases. If Anshar can create compelling mysteries with satisfying solutions, it might just make up for the game's other shortcomings. I guess we'll find out when the game is released on September 16.

Andy Kelly

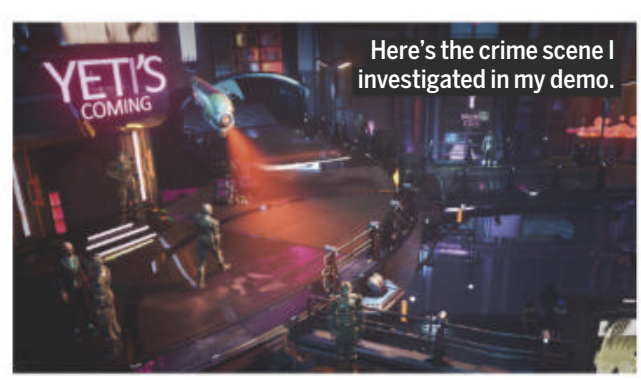
APPARENTLY GIANT FRUIT BATS ARE A PROBLEM IN THIS FUTURE WARSAW

The people lying in these pods are dead to the world in VR.

The Low City is where *Gamedec* really dials up the cyberpunk.



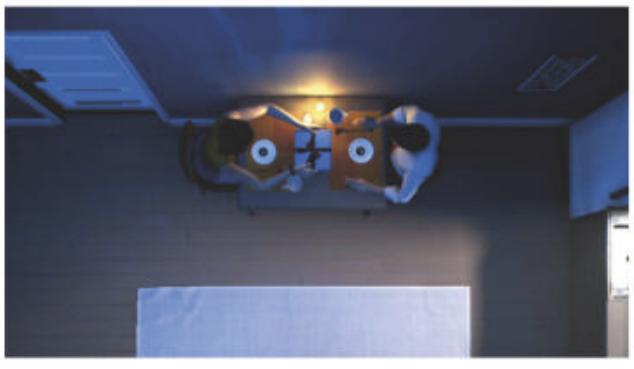
The wealthy get the nicest parts of this futuristic Warsaw to themselves.

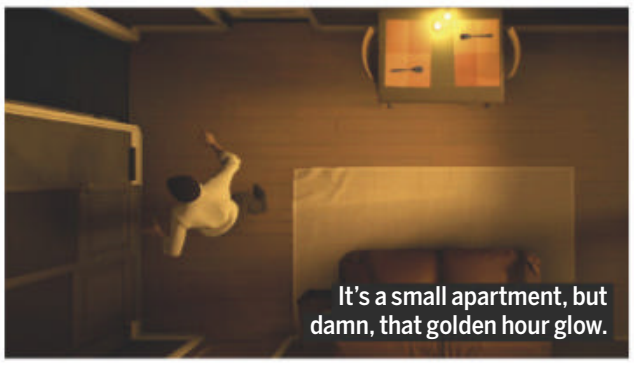


Here's the crime scene I investigated in my demo.

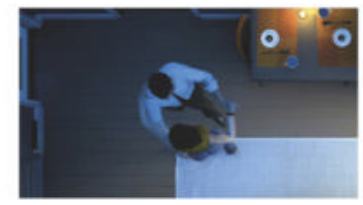
Twelve Minutes

Resisting is a good way to get your neck massaged.




It's a small apartment, but damn, that golden hour glow.

Sleeping actually lets you quickly advance the clock.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2021	Luis Antonio	Annapurna Interactive	twelveminutesgame.com

TWELVE MINUTES

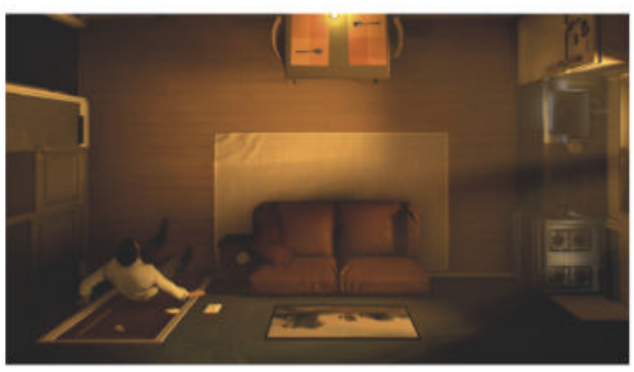
Solve a time loop mystery without leaving your flat

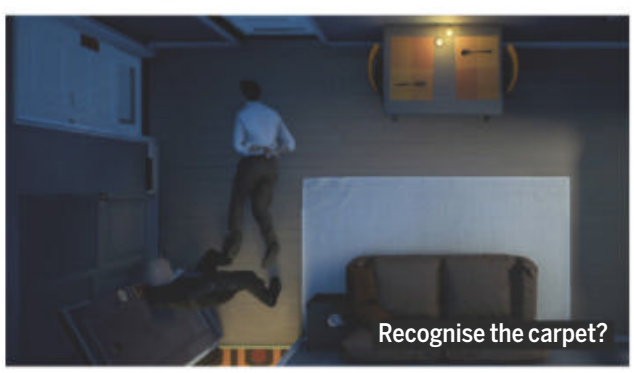
Willem Dafoe's face as the Green Goblin in Spider-Man still haunts me. I've been scared of Defoe for going on 20 years, and *Twelve Minutes* is proof that that fear remains strong even when I can't see his ghoulish grin. Here at least I have good reason: he only went and choked me to death.

That was the first time the aggressive cop, voiced by Dafoe, broke into my apartment and accused my wife of being a killer. It wouldn't be the last. *Twelve Minutes* is a time loop game, a miniature Groundhog Day mystery that hinges on this break-in and the buried story behind it. Before I played *Twelve Minutes*, I didn't expect my character to be aware of the time loop – I assumed this was a small game about trying to figure out all the possible ways this encounter could go, tugging on threads until you find the one that unravels the whole thing. But after Dafoe choked my character to death and I jumped back in time, I suddenly had new dialogue options with my wife – *honey, you're not going to believe this...*

According to creator Luis Antonio, you'll actually spend something like eight to ten hours to get through the game with new dialogue and interactions opening up as you do more loops. Your apartment is tiny, but it's surprising how many things you can do and how many variables can affect the outcome. On my second try, while my wife sat on the couch reading, oblivious to the cop who'd soon barge in, I grabbed a knife and hid in the closet, hoping to jump out and surprise him. I did jump out knife in hand, but Dafoe punched me and ended that loop.

Next I rooted around the apartment more, discovering some sleeping pills in the bathroom. Maybe I could give them to my wife and hide her in the bedroom so I could talk to the cop before he flew off the handle? While she sat on the couch I put the pills in a glass of water and filled it up in the kitchen sink. Antonio hinted that she probably wasn't going to take the glass after I drugged it right in front of her. But next time, if I tried mixing it in the bathroom first...





Recognise the carpet?

I DID JUMP OUT KNIFE IN HAND, BUT DAFOE PUNCHED ME AND ENDED THAT LOOP.

AGAINST THE CLOCK

Antonio's background is in art, so it's no surprise that *Twelve Minutes* looks lovely, softly lit and uncannily realistic in a way that reminds me of the stop motion film Anomalisa. The perspective is locked to a top-down camera that made me feel like a puppeteer, which was exaggerated by occasionally stiff and awkward animation. My character and his wife would sometimes bumble into each other as I walked around the room or robotically switch between animations. Those hiccups can disrupt the intimacy the game is going for – and it wants this to feel intensely personal.

PLAYED IT

In your first few minutes you're sitting down for dessert by candlelight, talking like a couple who've had years to get comfortable with one another. You find out your wife is pregnant. The angle makes slipping into their conversations almost voyeuristic, and the dialogue and performances are really effective – they remind me of the natural dialogue in indie great *Oxenfree*. I hope *Twelve Minutes'* last few months of development will iron out some of those goofy animations in what's otherwise a striking game.

Either way, the mystery is the big draw here. Most games *are* time loops, letting you play levels over and over. But I've never played one that handles its story like *Twelve Minutes*, letting my character's knowledge open up new possibilities in a tiny space full of puzzle pieces. I have a feeling that the final assembled puzzle will look a lot different than what I think I'm putting together at the start, and I'm really looking forward to finding out what that is.

Wes Fenlon

Intro

Games

YOUR GUIDE TO THE LATEST PC GAMES.

GAMES THIS ISSUE

065 RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE
070 NEIR REPLICANT
072 HITCHHIKER
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076 MOTOGP 21

SCORING SYSTEM

PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 100 scale. The higher, the better – though 100 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 100 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 50 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

POWERED BY
REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

LADY KILLER

RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE is a collection of bizarre, beautiful haunted houses, with some of the scariest moments in the entire series. ***By Andy Kelly***

Beginning with a scene of domestic bliss, our hero Ethan Winters (returning from *Resident Evil 7)* and his wife Mia prepare dinner and look after their newborn baby, Rosemary. Then something bad happens – I won't say what, because it's pretty shocking – and soon Ethan finds himself lost in an isolated village in a snowstorm, searching for his kidnapped child. It's a sharp, sudden intro, but an effective one, immediately setting the stakes high and establishing *Resident Evil Village*'s brutal, sadistic tone.

It's never explicitly stated where the village the game takes its name from is located, but a few clues point towards it being nestled somewhere in the wintry mountains of Romania. The village itself is a scrappy, ramshackle scattering of wood and brick houses, farmer's fields, and the occasional church. Over it looms a gothic castle with immense spires, and there are also traces of ancient ruins, suggesting a long and strange history. It's a magnificent setting, dripping with atmosphere, menace, and mystery. I wanted to explore every dingy corner of it.

DEAD SET

Ethan is a boring guy who always seems confused about what's going on, and never has anything interesting to say. This makes him a slightly unremarkable protagonist, but his extreme normality does heighten the eccentricity of the village's residents. The previous game's Baker family were a relatively grounded bunch of ghouls, but here Capcom has seriously ramped up the monstrousness of its antagonists. As Ethan hunts for Rose, he goes up against an impossibly tall and glamorous vampire, a weird mutant fish-man, a killer porcelain doll, and other assorted weirdos.

What I love about *Resident Evil Village* is that it never settles on being one kind of horror game. Each villain's lair features a very different take on the genre, from breathless, action-packed survival against hordes of enemies, to a more slow-burning, psychological approach. It's a game overflowing with ideas, constantly inventing clever, surprising new ways to get your heart rate rising and jolt you out of your comfort zone. And it manages to keep this up for pretty much the entire duration of the adventure.

> ***Resident Evil Village* almost has the feel of a horror anthology.**

Each section is so wildly different, *Village* almost has the feel of a horror anthology. Admittedly, this can make it feel inconsistent at times, as if all the parts are flimsily strung together. You often get the sense that Capcom had the ideas for the game's many brilliant set-pieces first, then decided how to connect them all together at the last minute. But it's worth it for the variety this approach offers. You genuinely never know what fresh weirdness the developer is going to throw at you next, and the imaginations of the artists and writers are firing on all cylinders.

This not only makes this the most varied *Resident Evil* to date, but arguably the scariest. One of the best examples of this is the mansion of Donna Beneviento, a dollmaker. In her creaking, dusty old house – which is littered with hundreds of eerie, black-eyed dolls in various states of disrepair – you're forced through a series of brilliantly constructed moments of understated, excruciatingly tense horror, culminating in an encounter that might well be the scariest single moment in *Resident Evil* history. I highly recommend playing this section – and the whole game, if possible – with a good pair of headphones, because the sound design is extremely good. It creates a real sense of 3D space, and you can identify where enemies and other horrors are lurking based on the sound they make alone.

In another section you're hunted by Lady Dimitrescu, the aforementioned lofty vampire. Her 15th century castle is an opulent labyrinth of ornate, gilded corridors and shadowy drawing rooms, lavishly decorated and softly lit by candles. It's an incredibly atmospheric setting, and the imposing Lady D bearing down on you (crouching to squeeze through doorways that are much too small for her) is thrillingly nerve-wracking. As she pursues, you have to hunt for objects to unlock the main gate, which involves some light puzzling »

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A first-person survival horror game

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

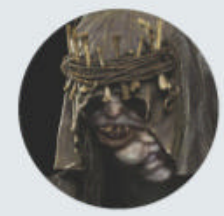
LINK
residentevil.com

FREAK SHOW

The village's creepiest residents

THE HAG
An old woman who wanders around the village saying things that may or may not be helpful.

KARL HEISENBERG
An eccentric engineering genius who lives in a factory near the village.



SALVATORE MOREAU
A mutated human who lives in a reservoir. The coat hides the extent of his mutations.

ALCINA DIMITRESCU
This enormous vampire lady drinks blood and lives in Castle Dimitrescu.

URIAS
A bearded giant with a collection of oversized weapons, including a huge spiked mace.

THE DUKE
A strange merchant. He knows a lot about the village, its history, and its twisted rulers.

and, in true *Resi* style, mentally mapping the building.

X FACTOR

Lady Dimitrescu isn't quite as terrifying as Mr X (the big guy with the hat) from the *Resident Evil 2* remake. While he was eerily silent at all times, Lady Dimitrescu loudly taunts you as she follows you around, which makes locating her easier. And the clink of her heels on the polished floors of the castle, while menacing enough, never filled me with quite as much dread as the wall-shaking thud of the Tyrant's footsteps. She's more of a *character* than him, and has some interesting backstory to uncover, but I never truly found her scary. The villains in *Village* are more exaggerated and moustache-twirling than *RE7*'s Baker family, who were just deeply horrible.

Castle Dimitrescu is perhaps the best showcase of *Resident Evil*'s impressive visuals – but the entire game is just obscenely pretty. The environments are richly detailed and stunningly lit, with a tangible layer of grime and texture to every object and surface. It runs smoothly, even at high resolutions, and raytracing makes for some gorgeous lighting and reflections. The character models are also spectacular, with expressive, convincing animation bringing the cast horribly to life. The English voice acting is a little hammy, but for the most part this suits these absurd, egomaniacal characters.

The castle and dollmaker's mansion are among the series' most memorable set-pieces. But I do wish they had squeezed more out of some of them. In one sense, I do appreciate how Capcom resists the urge to milk its ideas dry, enthusiastically tossing them aside to present something new to the player. This keeps things feeling fresh and unpredictable throughout. But occasionally I'd reach the end of one of these sequences and think "Is that it?". Sometimes I just wish the game would give me more time to soak it all in before shoving me through to the next room of the haunted house.

Elsewhere, the horror is more immediate. While *Resident Evil 7* had one type of regular enemy – the sludge-like Molded – *Village* features an array of savage horrors called Lycans. These feral, snarling creatures come in various forms, and you have to regularly switch up your tactics to fight them. The standard grunt Lycan isn't overly powerful, but they're agile and athletic, able to leap at you suddenly from a distance and clamber up walls and ladders, which makes for some entertainingly dramatic, fast-paced battles.

FURRY FRIENDS

I found the regular Lycans too cartoonishly werewolf-like to really be scared by them, but later iterations are much more intimidating. There are some really messed up creatures in the latter half of *Village*, including twitching biomechanical horrors with drills for arms, guys with chunks of rusty metal screwed to them as makeshift armour, and other similarly grim examples of Clive Barker-esque body horror. It makes those sentient blobs of black slime from *Resident Evil 7* seem very lame in comparison.

There are some really messed up creatures in *Village*.

While much of *Village* takes place in tight, narrow spaces, it sometimes opens up into larger arenas built with combat in mind. Here you'll find plenty of explosive barrels to lure groups of enemies towards, roofs to climb, houses to slip into, and furniture to drag across doorways to stem the flow of Lycans. These sections are enjoyably frantic, but are less interesting than the moments when you don't have to fire your weapon much, or at all. *Village* is a decent first-person shooter, but whenever Capcom focuses on atmosphere and tension over action, it's a much better game.

However, the developer seems to have almost entirely lost interest in puzzles. There are a few in *Village*, but they're extremely easy, with solutions that are always staring you right in the face. As someone who has always enjoyed the arcane, convoluted puzzles in *Resident Evil* games, I find this slightly disappointing. It does make for a pacier game, with fewer interruptions to the flow of exploration and combat. But I *like* those interruptions, and I feel like *Village* could have benefited from being a little more cerebrally taxing. I didn't get stuck at all in the 11 hours it took me to finish it.

I only died a handful of times too, which was surprising. There are some tricky battles, but the game is good at making you feel like you've scraped through them within an inch of your life. There's always *just* enough ammunition scattered around to muddle through the tougher fights, which may be evidence of some kind of dynamic difficulty system at play. If there is one, it hides it well. *Village* is pretty much perfectly paced, giving you ample space to explore and organise yourself before tossing you into the next chaotic action set-piece. And I never got bored. Not once.

NOBLE INTENTIONS

Ethan has very few allies in the village, and they tend to die horribly not long after meeting him. But a mysterious character known as The Duke is a constant friendly presence. He's a merchant with a curiously enigmatic personality, and always seems to be one step ahead of you. Turn a corner in a new area and you'll find him there, quietly puffing on a cigar, eagerly awaiting your coin. He sells weapons, ammo, crafting blueprints and other helpful stuff, and will buy any treasure you happen to pick up – including the crystallised remains of bosses, which always fetch a tidy price.

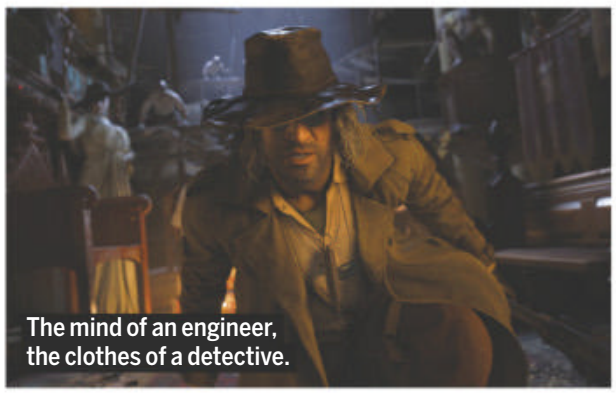
If you're a completionist, then you'll appreciate how the map works. If a room you're in still has treasure or other secrets left to find in it, it'll be marked red on the map. Find everything and it turns blue. It's a nice way to make sure you've scavenged every useful item before you move on – which is important when every bullet counts. You can craft ammo and health items too, which feels a bit tacked-on and that it's just included for the sake of it. But you will be doing it a lot, frequently snapping into the crafting

FAMILIAR TERRITORY

***All the ways* Village *is like* Resident Evil 4**

- Enigmatic merchant
- **European setting**
- Isolated rural village
- **Weird religious rituals**
- Corrupted villagers
- **Minibosses**
- Upgradeable weapons
- **Chickens running around**

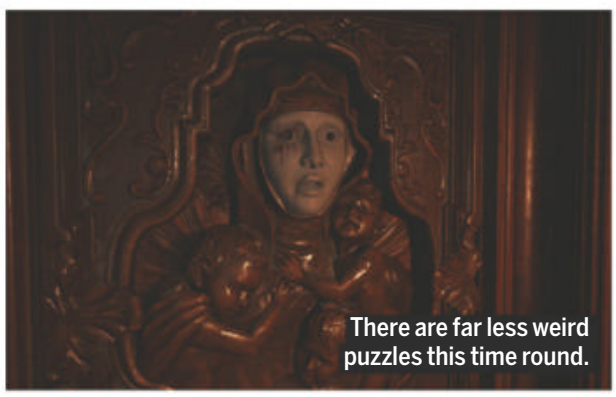
If in doubt, just bolt a bunch of scrap to a monster.


The mind of an engineer, the clothes of a detective.

A tranquil moment between bouts of running for my life.

There are hints of the first game's mansion.

Wrap up warm, Ethan – you'll catch your death out here.


There are far less weird puzzles this time round.

Chris Redfield has more depth and nuance than ever before.

Would it kill you to put up some new wallpaper?

Is that a warning? Because I'm going to ignore it.

The environments are wonderfully gothic.

Look, it's the tall vampire lady from the internet.

menu mid-battle to top up your bullet supply or brew up a fresh bottle of healing fluid.

The Duke can also upgrade weapons and turn raw ingredients into meals that permanently increase your health, defence, and movement speed. As you explore the village you'll encounter a range of wildlife including pigs, sheep, chickens, and the occasional fish splashing around in a stream. Shoot them and they'll drop meat, which The Duke can then use to whip up one of these tasty stat-boosting feasts. This is one of several optional quests and distractions, which help *Village* feel slightly less linear than the last game, even if the story does follow a strictly prescribed path.

Running into The Duke gives me the same feeling of relief I get when I find a safe room in the old *Resident Evil* games. It's a chance to breathe, regroup, tidy up your cluttered inventory, and save at the nearby typewriter. Yes, typewriters are back, but you don't need ink ribbons to use them. Inventory management is an important consideration in *Village*, but limited to weapons, ammunition, and health items. There are no magic item boxes in this game, so if a weapon or some other bulky object is taking up too much space, you'll either have to sell it or pay to increase the size of your inventory.

Important items like door keys and objects needed to solve puzzles don't take up any inventory space, and are stored in a separate, bottomless menu – which is one major way *Village* streamlines the classic *Resident Evil* formula. Treasure doesn't take up any inventory space either, so you can carry around as many crystal skulls as you like. I must admit, I miss the old system, where picking up a key might mean sacrificing a weapon or some other helpful item. But it does mean less time spent in menus or backtracking to find item boxes, which, again, increases the overall pace of the game.

Compared to *RE7*, *Village* has a much more interesting structure. A large, open square in the centre of the village acts as a hub, from which all the major locations in the game branch off, locked by a series of keys. This is a safe zone, similar to the main hall of *RE2*'s police station, and you revisit it frequently. Here you get easy access to The Duke, as well as the entrances to each villain's lair. The village also hides several optional areas, which contain extra story details, rare treasure, and even minibosses. This rewards you for taking the time to wander off the beaten path and explore.

Although *Resident Evil 7* had the feel of a soft reboot, only lightly touching on the series' larger mythology, *Village* contains some major revelations that impact every game in the series in hindsight. If you're a fan of these stories and you feel like the last few games have been light on new information about this universe and characters, *Village* will not disappoint. But the important thing is that it's not one of those *Resi* sequels that bombards you with dumb new lore. These revelations are big and important, but sit quietly in the background, letting Ethan's story stand on its own.

Village can feel like half a dozen horror games jammed together.

REDFIELD OF DREAMS

One of the biggest surprises in the game is Chris Redfield, who has, of course, been a part of the series since the very beginning. *Resident Evil* characters have always felt like cardboard cut-outs to me. They're more like sentient costumes than *people*. But in Village, in which Redfield plays an important role, he feels, for the first time, like a proper, nuanced, flawed character. He's exactly as cynical, angry and exhausted as a guy who's spent his entire adult life fighting bioweapons should be. I'd love to see more of the *Resi* cast fleshed out in this way.

Finishing the story unlocks a store where you can purchase a selection of extras with an in-game currency earned by unlocking achievements. These include a return of The Mercenaries, a fan favourite arcade/time attack mode. In *Village*'s take on it, you can buy items and weapons from The Duke between rounds. But otherwise it remains faithful to the mode popularised by *Resi 4*. There's a New Game+ mode too, which lets you carry your weapons and upgrades over to a second, harder run. It's also worth spending a few points on figures for the 3D model viewer, because it really highlights just how incredible the character models are in this game.

Village can occasionally feel like half a dozen different horror games jammed together. But the strength and variety of its ideas, the quality of the art direction and its darkly evocative atmosphere more than make up for it. It's a bold and experimental horror game, but also one that leans into the series' past glories – particularly *Resident Evil 4*. There's a lot of Mikami's 2005 reinvention here, from the enigmatic merchant and weapon upgrades to the rural setting and corrupted villagers. But ultimately, *Village* is its own game with its own identity, and the elements it borrows from earlier sequels never define it.

This is a quality horror game in its own right, and proof *Resident Evil* still has the power to thrill, surprise, and scare 25 years on. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A grimly beautiful collection of killer horror set-pieces, with the most memorably grotesque enemies in *Resi* history.

85

FLAVOUR TOWN *The Duke's tastiest stat-boosting recipes*

BIRD AND BEAST PILAF
Meat and poultry cooked with rice and stock. Eat this dish and the damage you take while guarding enemy attacks is reduced.

TOCHITURA DE PUI
A savoury stew made from the meat of a rare bird, which lives somewhere in the village. Gives you a large permanent HP increase.

SARMALE DE PESTE
Cabbage roll stuffed with fish. The Duke says they're "so light you'll feel weightless", which gives you a permanent movement speed boost.

NIER AT HAND

NIER REPLICANT is a welcome second chance for a singular action-RPG. ***By Julie Muncy***

If you didn't know that *Nier* was the final game from studio Cavia Games, you might be able to tell from playing it. The action RPG feels like a final act: a swing for the fences characterised by anger, tragedy, and a desperate sense of sincerity. And like most desperate swings, it failed at the time: sales were poor, Cavia Games was absorbed into its parent company, and *Nier*'s creative director, Yoko Taro, moved on to ply his craft elsewhere.

If *Nier* was characterised by desperation, *Nier Replicant* (technically named *Nier Replicant ver.1.22474487139...* but that's just silly) is an act of love. Created by developer Toylogic and publisher Square Enix with the direct involvement of Taro and his regular band of collaborators, this remaster feels like an attempt to make good on the ideas and promises of that original game. After its sequel *Nier Automata* became an unlikely hit in 2017, the team is betting that now is the right time to reintroduce broader audiences to the charms of the original game. Maybe this time they'll be more receptive.

I honestly don't know if they will: even in its remastered form, *Nier* remains a singular and at times tedious game, a piece of art eager to try *everything* and constantly seeking out the hardest notes to hit. But it's one of the most memorable games I've played, and the remaster ups its greatness in just about every way.

If you come into *Nier* expecting a direct prequel to *Automata*'s cyberpunk-and-thigh-highs existentialist action, you're going to be disappointed. Taking place literally thousands of years before that story, it's set in a post-apocalypse that's swung right back around to pastoral fantasy, following a boy and his sister in a world of magic diseases, monsters, and at least one talking book. As that boy, you'll be questing around a dark fantasy world while trying to cure your sister of a terrible disease, joining up with some of the best outcasts in gaming: Grimoire Weiss, the book; Kainé, a half-monster warrior woman who casually drops words like 'shitpurse' into combat dialogue; and Emil, the sweetest little boy you've ever met who also happens to have terrifying magic abilities.

The combat is significantly more dynamic and fluid than in the original.

The game plays out like a sort of dark pastiche of standard fantasy adventure games like *The Legend of Zelda*, delighting in videogame conventions while also subverting them and turning to deeper thematic territory, meditating on violence, human cruelty, and what it means to persist in a world that wants you dead and is probably dying itself.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A full remaster of a beloved and strange action JRPG

DEVELOPER
In-house, Toylogic Inc

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i7-8750H, 16GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
nier.square-enix-games.com/en-us

NIER ENOUGH

You'll be spending most of your time running around lush fields and dank dungeons, doing quests and fighting ethereal monsters called Shades. Taking after *Automata*, the combat is significantly more dynamic and fluid than it was in the original, with combos and dodges that feel graceful and responsive. Magic, once clunky and slow to use, is now integrated neatly into combat. Parts of the game that were obtuse before are more clearly explained, like a notorious fishing minigame that now is less of a roadblock. *Nier*'s genre shifts pop more, too, now that the core combat mechanics are so much more fun.

The graphics are more advanced now, not quite cutting-edge but at least on par with *Automata*. And many of the visual touches that were key to the original *Nier* are recreated in a more advanced fashion.

There's new material here, too, a smattering of new quests and story beats that don't change the narrative so much as they deepen it.

Ultimately though this is still *Nier*. Like the original, it relies on repetition, layering narrative over multiple playthroughs, which is inventive, but also tiresome in later stages. Like the original game, it has never even heard of subtlety. But like the original, it's also heartfelt.

I don't know how people are going to respond to *Nier* in 2021, even with all the new bells and whistles. It's far from perfect. But I'm telling you: it's worth it. The original is one of my favourite games ever made, and the remaster improves it. *Nier* is special. This is a new chance to try it out. I think you should take it. ■

IT'S COMPLICATED *Making sense of the* Drakengard-Nier *timeline*

DRAKENGARD 3
Yes, this one is first. It's a prequel.

DRAKENGARD
Continues in *Drakengard 3*'s world with dragons, monsters, and gods.

NIER (REPLICANT AND GESTALT)
One of *Drakengard*'s endings warps you to modern-day Tokyo. This is where the *Nier* games take place.

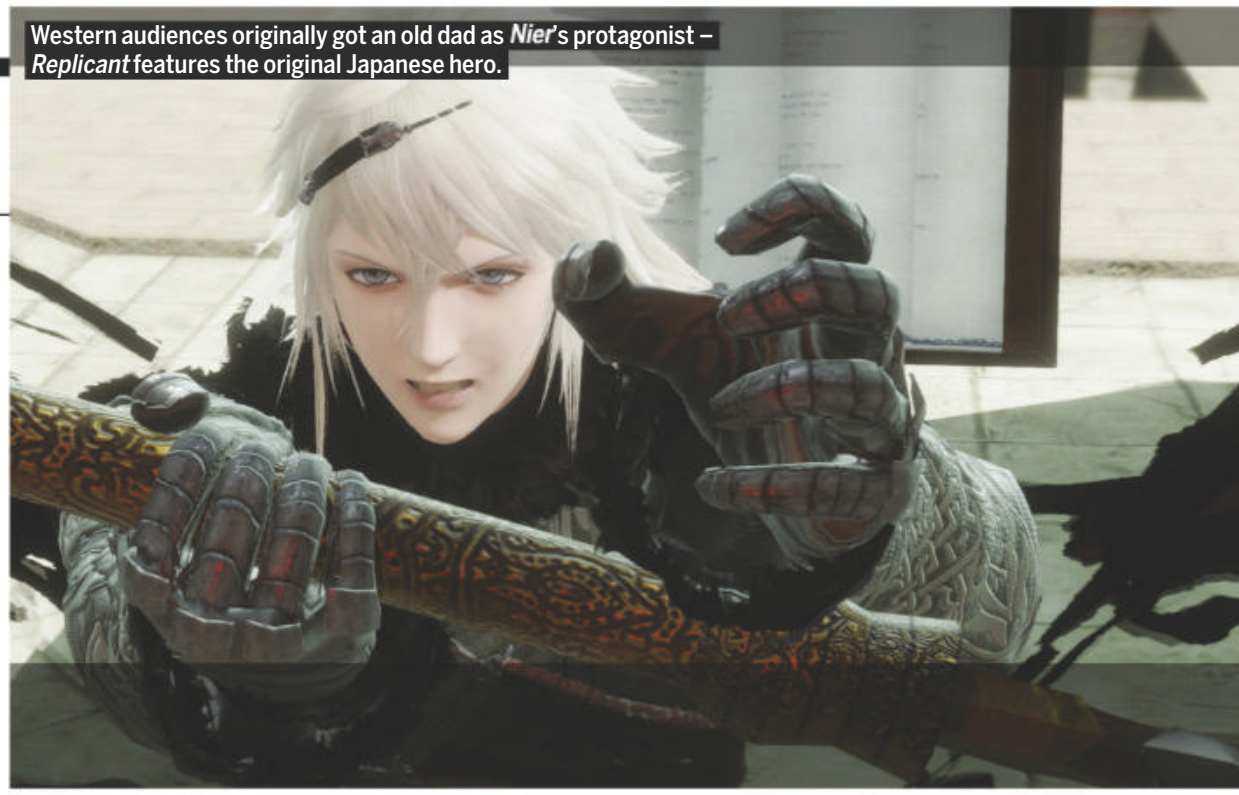
NIER AUTOMATA
Then, thousands of years after *Nier Replicant/Gestalt*, we've got this one. It's about robots now. Also aliens, for some unknown reason.

DRAKENGARD 2
A direct sequel to the first game, continuing from another one of *Drakengard*'s endings. A bit rubbish, is never mentioned again.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A tribute to a cult classic, *Nier Replicant* is a fabulous remaster that retains what made the original special.

90



Western audiences originally got an old dad as *Nier*'s protagonist – *Replicant* features the original Japanese hero.

Combat has been updated to feel a little snappier and more like *Nier Automata*.

Genre-bending sequences include a top-down dungeon crawl.

ROAD TRIPPIN'

Strap in for a surreal ride across the American midwest in HITCHHIKER. *By Robert Zak*

I'm strapped into the passenger seat of a car somewhere in the American midwest. I don't know how I got here, just like I don't know how I'll end up alongside the next four drivers I hitch a ride with in *Hitchhiker*. In an even vaguely real-world context, this scenario could be a little alarming, given how vulnerable I am as an amnesiac hitchhiker with no sense of direction.

But as soon my driver, a raisin farmer called Vern, starts musing about everything from relationships to philosophical raisin-based analogies, a wave of comfort washes over me and I'm all aboard for the ride – wherever it may take me.

Why our protagonist is hitchhiking across America will eventually become clear (sort of). But while I'm riding shotgun with this procession of philosopher-drivers ruminating about everything from relationships to ageing, to the strange world that exists beneath shopping mall escalators, the protagonist's own story about his relationship troubles takes a backseat.

It doesn't take long for you to realise that these roads you're traversing – set across iconic American locales like the Utah desert and American suburbia – are perhaps more figurative than literal. Tumbleweeds with eyes stalk you, an invisible dog runs through the suburban streets, and green fireflies guide you to take photos that start filling in your character's backstory – the reason you're on this dreamy yet eerie journey in the first place.

The reason, it transpires, is your character's crumbling long-term relationship, which is tarnished by guilt, jealousy and the painful question of when to let go. You only get glimpses of the relationship itself through flashbacks, photos, and the testimony of the characters you meet, but really the purpose of this entire odyssey across America is to face up to deep-buried truths our wayfaring hero knows about his relationship but is struggling to face up to.

You only get glimpses of the relationship itself through flashbacks.

Even by the standards of a narrative-driven game, *Hitchhiker* is largely non-interactive beyond looking around, dialogue choices, and the occasional light puzzle. And that's fine, because the writing is strong enough to carry player-passengers like me through its modest length, especially as each ride is broken up by a beautiful vignette illustrating a story that a given driver tells – from a black-and-white chalkboard tale about a man waiting for years to go through a gate, to a vibrant cartoon about a city built of rubber.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A surreal narrative-driven game following a hitchhiker

DEVELOPER
Mad About Pandas

PUBLISHER
Versus Evilz

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 7 5800H, Nvidia GeForce 3080, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
hitchhiker-game.com

ROAD ISLANDS

It's strange, surrealist stuff, but the imagery and writing bind it together in a way that makes it feel warm and hypnotic rather than obscure and aloof. At one point, Leah, the third driver, sums up the protagonist's relationship as "one year of falling in love and four of breaking apart" – a brutal but grounded and all-too-relatable stab of reality.

But for a game where your main form of interaction is binary dialogue choices, and one that is ostensibly about facing up to hard truths, *HitchHiker* doesn't imbue your choices with enough meaning.

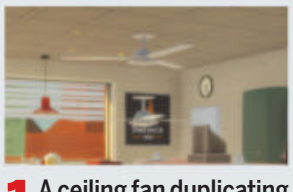
Late in the game, my blood ran cold with regret when I believed I'd made the wrong decision in the spur of the moment. But when I replayed the scene after I completed the game, I found that there was only one possible outcome all along. It undercut the illusion built throughout the game that my choices in some way shaped this journey.

It's a shame that such a narrative-focused game doesn't use branching dialogue, player agency in the story, multiple endings, and other well-established tools that make videogames such a powerful storytelling medium.

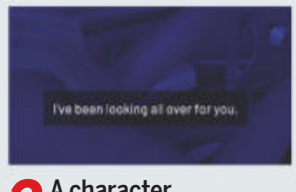
So *HitchHiker* was a bittersweet experience in the end, not quite fulfilling the themes its characters did such a great job in conveying. It has, however, stuck with me, filling me with thoughts that go beyond the game and into real life: what is the key to happiness in a life shared with someone, and is the answer maybe hidden in a box of raisins? ■

BUG OR INTENTIONAL?

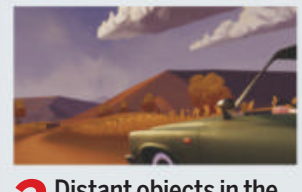
It's full of surreal imagery, but also a few bugs. Can you tell them apart?



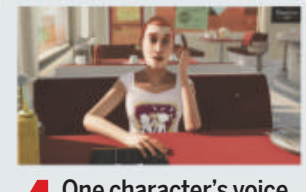
1 A ceiling fan duplicating and slowly floating down from the ceiling.



2 A character incessantly repeating their last line of dialogue.



3 Distant objects in the landscape popping in and out of existence.



4 One character's voice suddenly switching to another character's.

Answers: 1, 2 & 4 – Intentional, 3 – Bug

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

***Hitchhiker A Mystery Game* is a wonderfully written game, but one where you're never in the driving seat.**

79

You get to confront drivers and direct conversation, but this won't affect any story outcomes.

The hitchhiker's crumbling relationship is at the heart of his journey.

There are a few puzzles, but they're mostly to keep your fingers busy.

Each character will enrich you with musings about life and the universe.

CIRCUIT BREAKER

SILICON DREAMS asks, are you feeling lucky, cyberpunk? *By Luke Kemp*

Although Blade Runner has inspired three trillion and six movies, games, books, comics, albums, and cereals, only a tiny percentage of these have understood (or even *tried* to understand) the film. Throwing neon signs and Japanese words around your environment like a baby gleefully hurling porridge across the kitchen has nothing to do with cyberpunk. Here, however, we have a game that not only *understands* Blade Runner, but thoroughly deserves to be mentioned alongside it. Y'know, like I just did.

Your character is an android created with the sole purpose of running what is for legal reasons absolutely not a Voight-Kampff machine. The game (mostly) consists of a half dozen or so interrogations conducted with this machine. Usually you'll be speaking with androids, but occasionally with a human. You see, while you *will* at one point be tasked with determining whether somebody is human or android, the experience for the most part takes sharp turns into territory you'll never see coming.

With no voice acting and relatively simple graphics, there is enormous pressure on the script. The writing is incredible, some of the best I've come across in a game in years. Somewhat ironically, each and every android that I meet seems more human than most of the other countless characters I've met in other games.

The writing is incredible, some of the best I've come across.

The depth and texture afforded to the interview subjects is not only impressive, it is incredibly important to the experience. I'm being pulled in several directions at once. Every interview has an accompanying report to be filled in and, for androids, one of three choices must be made: release, send for maintenance (which guarantees a memory wipe), or destroy. Yet things are not nearly as simple as they may appear.

As an android myself, I am expected to toe the company line at all times. It's made clear that any attempt to defy my employers, or provision of information that contradicts their expectations (intentionally or otherwise), will immediately cast suspicion on me. I am assessed for my performance after every interview. If my rating falls too low, I will be destroyed and replaced. That's automation for you.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A game that makes Blade Runner's desk work pretty intense

DEVELOPER
James Patton, Clockwork Bird

PUBLISHER
Clockwork Bird

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
clockworkbird.net/games

DOUBLE DECKARD

The interrogation machine that you use displays the emotions that accompany the answers of interviewees, exposing lies and confirming truths. Certain androids are also supposed to have certain emotions limited or disabled, and the company expects you to report any such deviations. Ingratiate yourself with the company enough and you even unlock the ability to slowly induce an emotion of your choice.

During one interrogation, I'm told that in order to get a truthful answer to an important question, I'll need to induce fear in the subject. Hating myself for doing so, but considering it necessary, I lock down the shackles in the interview chair. The interviewee immediately becomes surprised and distressed and, well, it achieves the desired effect.

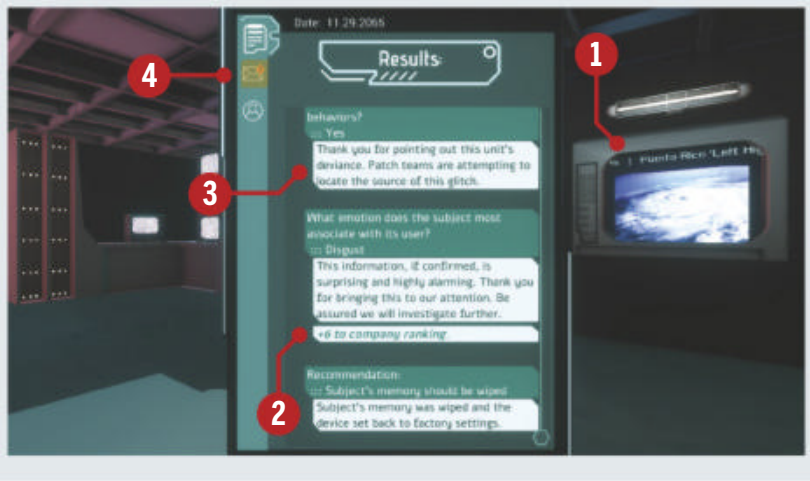
Most conversations twist and turn into unexpected alleys, and throw me into a variety of emotional corners. One android I eventually decided to trash but felt terrible about it; another, I sympathised with to the point where I decided that a memory wipe was the best option, and I felt saddened when the company destroyed him anyway.

While the writing consistently displays impressive subtlety and enormous intelligence, at one point providing a strong analogy for the life of some sectors of the working class. I have mixed feelings about the first ending I got which, while providing meaningful summaries of the fates of my interviewees, provided an epilogue for myself which didn't lead on quite so smoothly from my final actions. Nonetheless, it's an experience that will stay with me for some time, and one that I know I'll be going back to. ■

MY NAUGHTY REPORT *What do the bosses think?*

1 The TV in your quarters. Used for darkly satirical news.

2 Most of your answers will see you earn or lose points according to company goals and expectations.



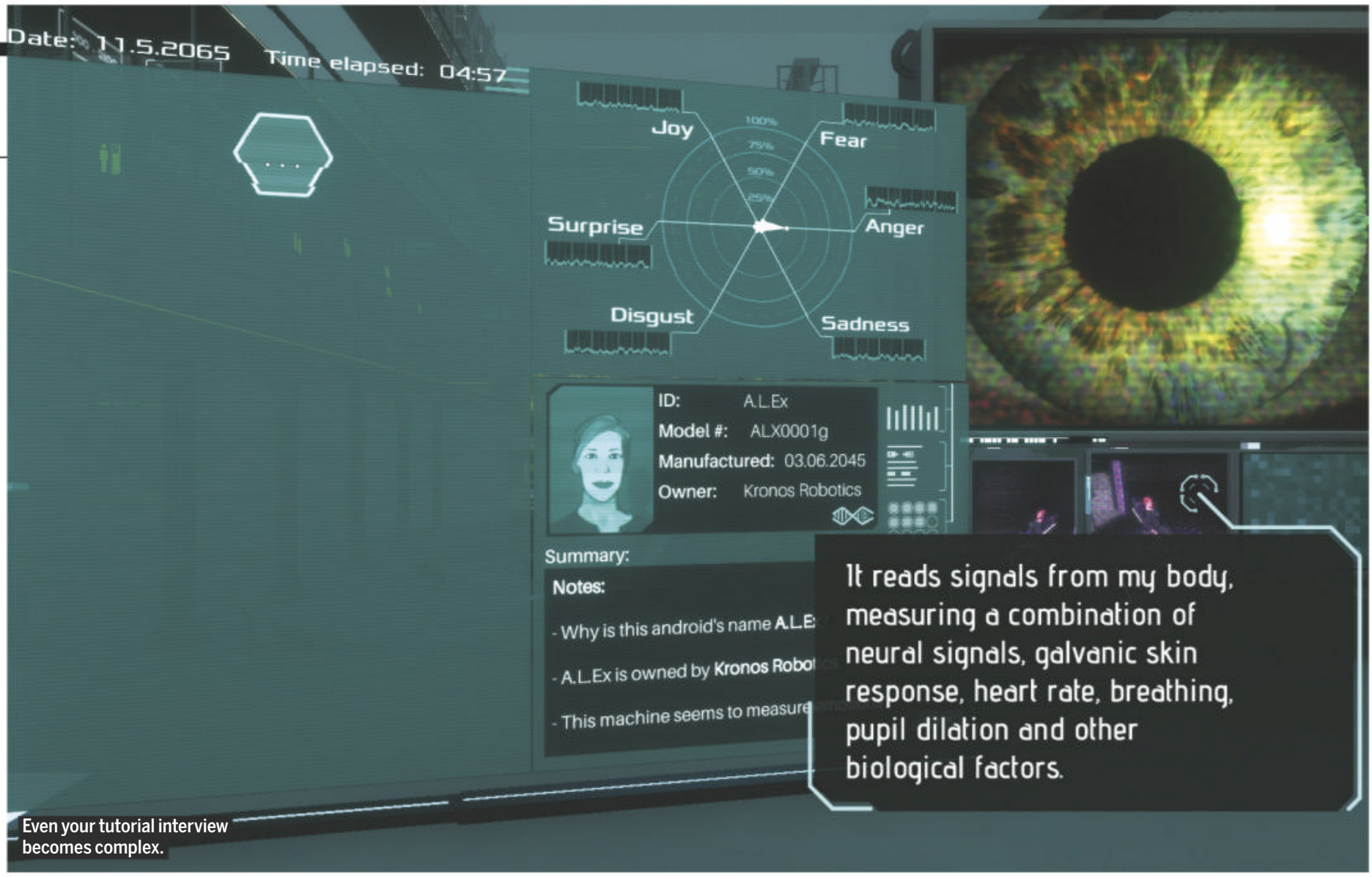
3 The company responds to each answer individually, often hinting at the consequences of your decision.

4 A new message. Your final score... and maybe a stern warning.

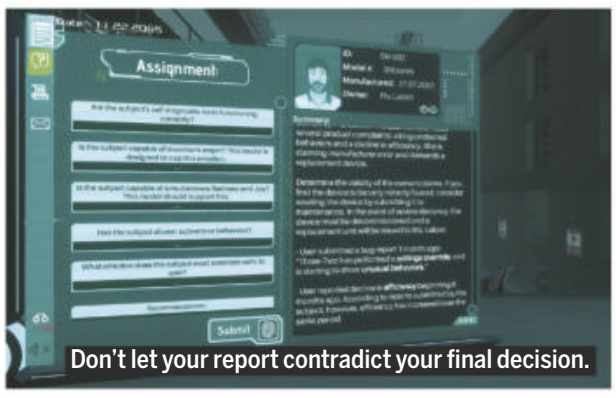
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Silicon Dreams is an extremely intelligent sci-fi interrogation sim that's unpredictable for all the right reasons.

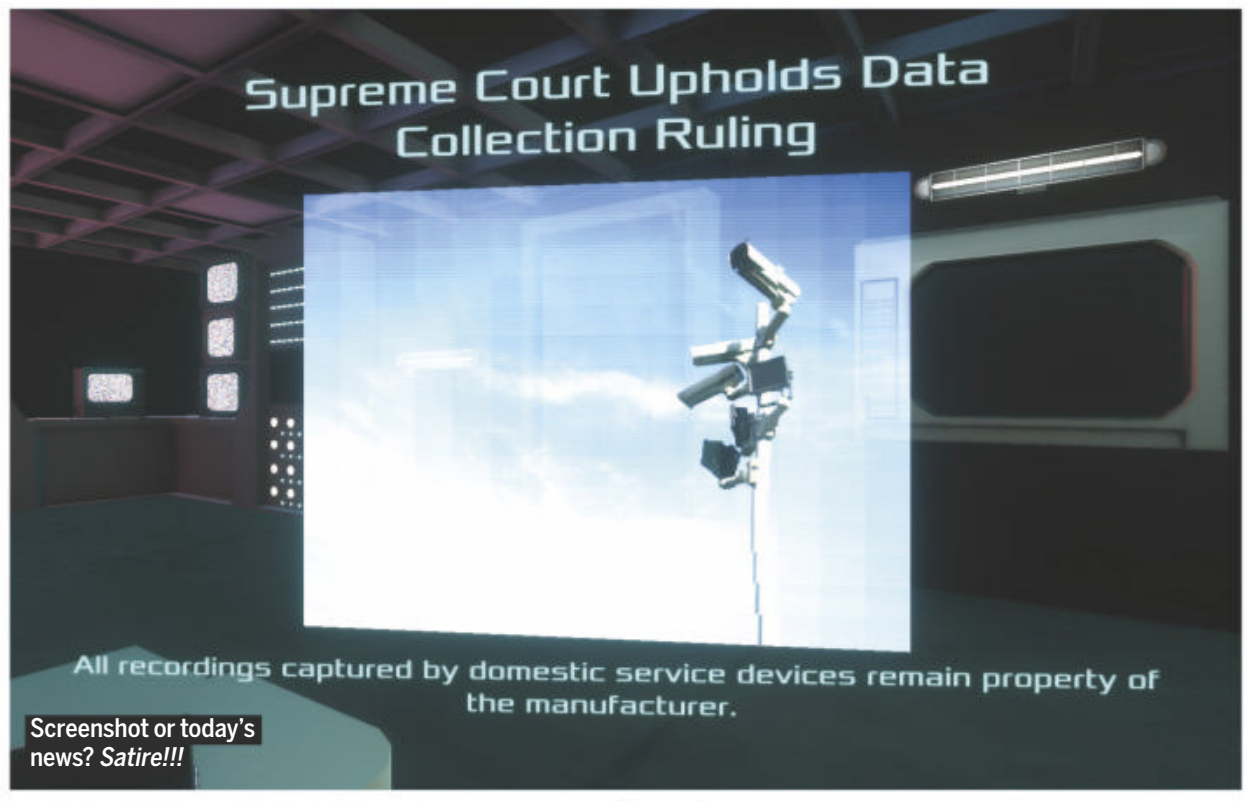
89

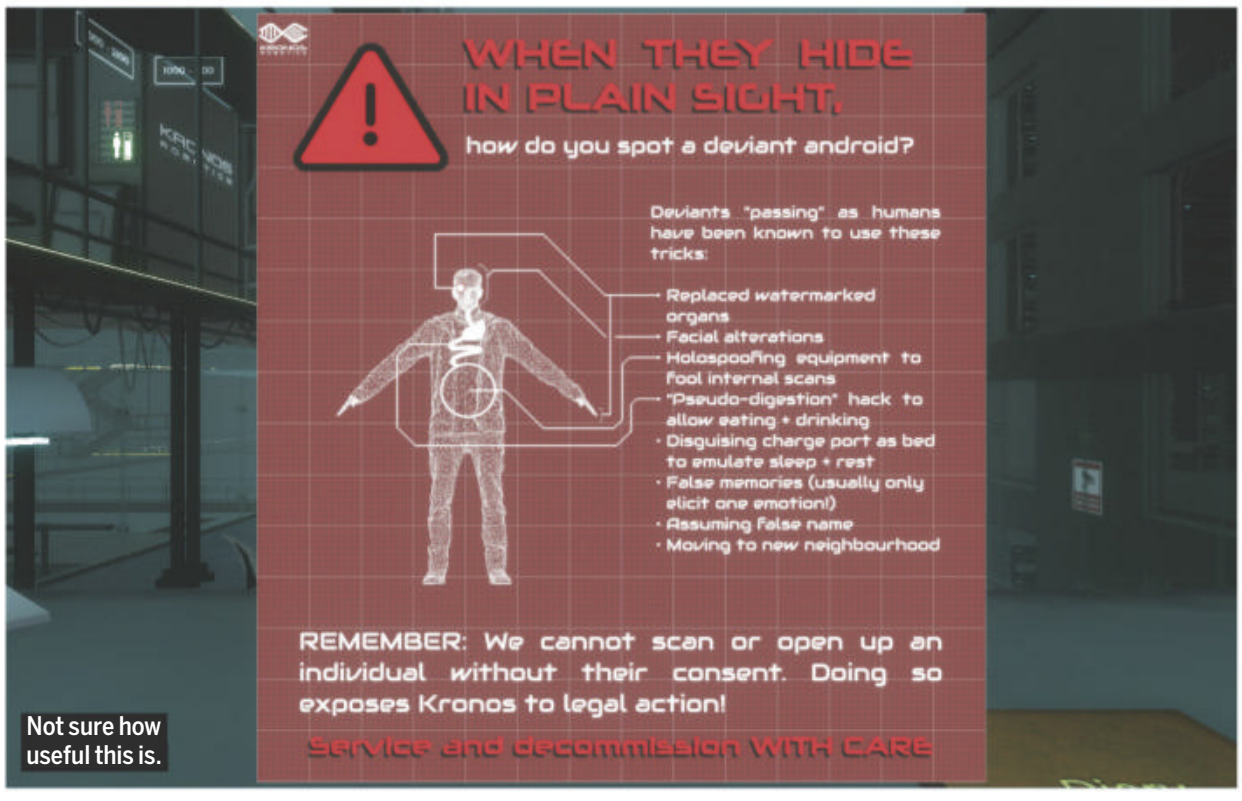


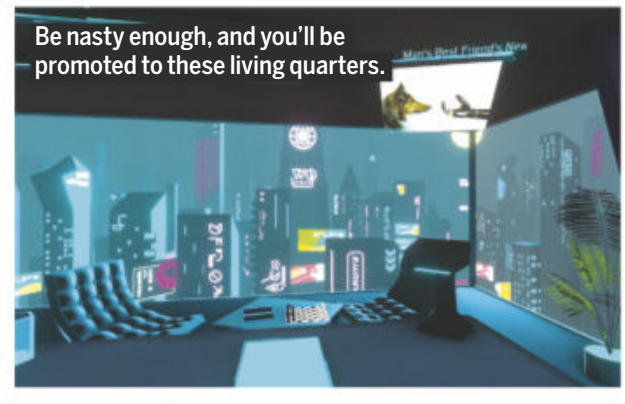
Even your tutorial interview becomes complex.

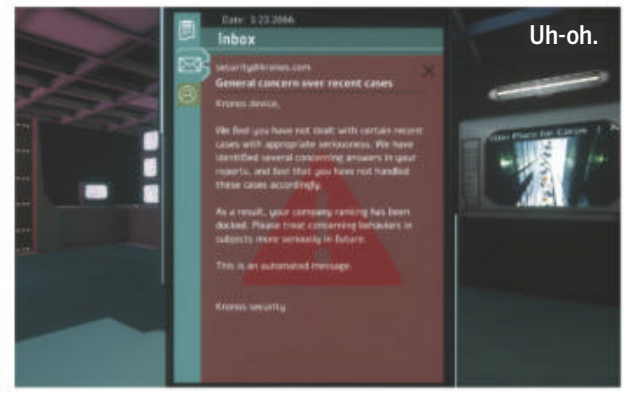


Don't let your report contradict your final decision.


Supreme Court Upholds Data Collection Ruling
All recordings captured by domestic service devices remain property of the manufacturer.
Screenshot or today's news? *Satire!!!*


WHEN THEY HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT,
how do you spot a deviant android?
Deviants "passing" as humans have been known to use these tricks:
- Replaced watermarked organs
- Facial alterations
- Holospoofing equipment to fool internal scans
- "Pseudo-digestion" hack to allow eating + drinking
- Disguising charge port as bed to emulate sleep + rest
- False memories (usually only elicit one emotion!)
- Assuming false name
- Moving to new neighbourhood
REMEMBER: We cannot scan or open up an individual without their consent. Doing so exposes Kronos to legal action!
Service and decommission WITH CARE
Not sure how useful this is.


Be nasty enough, and you'll be promoted to these living quarters.



Uh-oh.

SCRAPING BY

Despite technical wobbles, MOTOGP 21 justifies another annual release. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

Are you new to motorcycle racing games? Well let me tell you this: *MotoGP 21* is going to be really difficult. But what am I saying – perhaps you're a perennial hundred-hour player in Milestone's long-running bike sim, with every braking zone from Losail turn 1 to Valencia's Adrian Campos corner memorised. Guess what: *MotoGP 2* is still going to be really difficult.

This series has taken a turn simwards since its move to UnrealEngine in 2018, but this year's release represents the most noticeable shift in difficulty and realism in years. In particular, changes to suspension and braking make themselves felt in every corner entry and apex, demanding a different approach than last year's game asked of you. And if you didn't play any of last year's game: oh boy...

But let's zoom out a bit, because being a modern licensed racing title, there are depths to plumb here that extend way beyond the MotoGP licence and its associated circuits. The main course Milestone offers you is a career mode in which your custom rider graduates from Moto3 through Moto2 and finally to the big leagues – or just picks a ride in the fastest category as a rookie, your call.

In any event, you're given RPG-like levels of control over your team, earning upgrade points by ticking off objectives in practice sessions and then spending them on bike development. This time you're even assigning specific members of staff to each upgrade project based on their specialisms.

All that inter-team tweaking can be rewarding over the long term, particularly if you take *MotoGP 21* up on its offer to run a completely new team from scratch. There's not enough here to prevent annualised release fatigue, though.

The frustration is real, then, but the rewards are plentiful.

ON YOUR BIKE

That's where the on-track changes come in. However good you were at *MotoGP 20*, you're going to have to completely revise your braking technique here, because the physics changes have a profound effect in those few hundred metres before the apex. It's controller-smashingly easy to apply too much front brake pressure and tip your weight too far forwards, ending up in either a stoppie or a lock-up that sends you sailing past the racing line.

The feeling and timing of shifting your rider's weight from one side of the bike to the other is slower, more precarious and more believable now, too. And with those two new facets of the handling are combined, *MotoGP 21* asks you to think one turn ahead, in a very real sense.

The frustration is real, then, but the rewards are plentiful. For anyone who cared about realism in the pre-Unreal Engine *MotoGP*s, the ability to constantly tweak your speed and trajectory with taps of the brake or throttle were an immersion killer. The last few games have been working up to a handling model which demands you pick a line and either stick with it or upset your bike, and this year Milestone achieves it.

But there's trouble in this paradise of two-wheeled poise and balletic gliding from apex to apex. That trouble takes its most noticeable form in the AI riders, who employ some very odd tactics including: constantly wiggling very slightly from side to side on straights, crashing 90% of the time in a particular turn at Assen, and never taking a long lap penalty. They also reset to the track straight after crashing, so if you have the new bike recovery mechanic enabled, you'll spend ten seconds running your rider over to his bike and picking it back up while any other fallers are already three turns up the road.

Something's changed in the lighting, too, which makes this year's game appear flatter and duller than the last, while the tyre spray from wet races has a distracting flicker.

You should buy *MotoGP 21* anyway, though, if you have even a sliver of interest in the exploits of Quartararo, Mir, Vinales, Rossi, and the gang. Its meaty career mode can hold you for months, and the uncompromising handling model holds a fascination all of its own. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A racing sim carrying the official MotoGP licence

DEVELOPER
Milestone Interactive

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
I7 9700K, RTX 2080 TI, 16GB RAM Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/2Rk0OCs

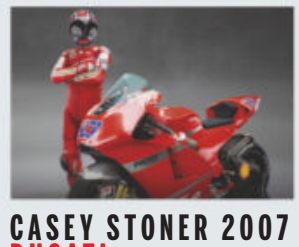
Milestone's latest MotoGP is wobbly and unstable in all the right ways, and some of the wrong ones too.

71

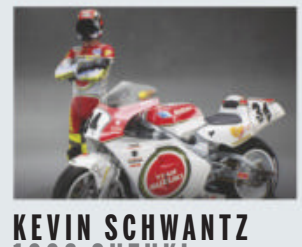
MOTO IMMORTALS *Four legends from* MotoGP 21*'s retro rider content*

MICK DOOHAN
1999 HONDA
Quick Mick dominated the late-1990s on his Repsol Honda before injuries forced him to pull up the stumps.

VALENTINO ROSSI
2001 HONDA
The Doctor. The GOAT. Valentino goes by many names, but his legend was forged on this maiden title-winning Honda.



CASEY STONER 2007
DUCATI
He came, he saw, he conquered, he sacked if off at age 27. The Aussie was never better than when riding this Ducati.



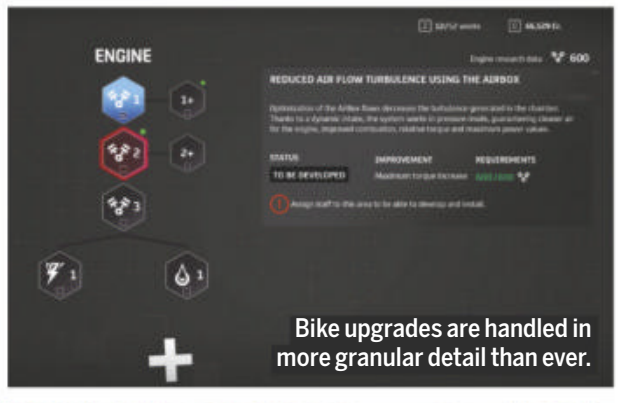
KEVIN SCHWANTZ
1993 SUZUKI
Unfortunately the wins dried up for Suzuki after Schwantz's championship on the now iconic Lucky Strike bike.

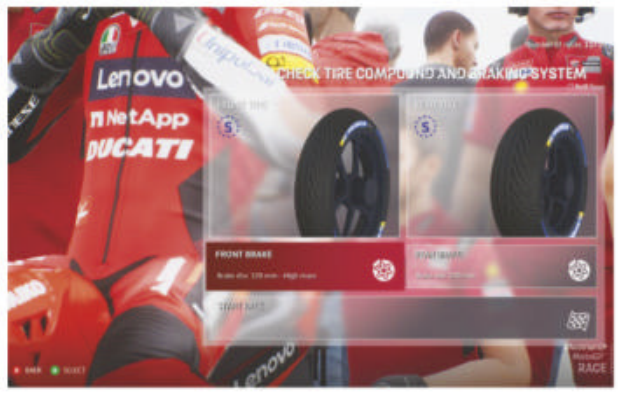
Tarmac textures: pretty, but not worth risking your life to examine.

Presentation is often spookily similar to Codies' F1 series.

1 M Viñ 12
GAP +0.292
2 F Bag 63
GAP -0.434
3 J Mir 36
4 F Qua 20
5 J Zar 5
6 F Mor 21
7 M Mar 93
8 A Rin 42
1 M. Viñales 12
The suggested racing line is next to useless. Turn it off.

R --:--.--
TISSOT
1 01:40.358
5 J. Miller 43
3 AW TCS
248 km/h
FRONT
REAR
TCS 5 AW 5 EBS 5 PWR 3
Hitching a ride by grabbing onto the bike in front is frowned upon.


ENGINE
REDUCED AIR FLOW TURBULENCE USING THE AIRBOX
STATUS
IMPROVEMENT
REQUIREMENTS
TO BE DEVELOPED
Bike upgrades are handled in more granular detail than ever.


Lenovo
NetApp
DUCATI
FRONT BRAKE

Intro

Tech

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE.

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD

Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.

PC PowerPlay SMART BUY

Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

GEAR THIS ISSUE

079 AOC U34G3X
080 MONITORS GROUP TEST
084 GAMING MOUSE GROUP TEST
082 SPECIAL REPORT: CRYPTO

THE PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU INTEL I7 7700K INTEL.COM.AU
MOBO ASUS Z270 ROG CROSSHAIR VI HERO ASUS.COM.AU
RAM 2 X BALLISTIX 8GB DDR4-3200 CRUCIAL.COM
PSU CORSAIR 850W PSU CORSAIR.COM
COOLING H105 CORSAIR COOLER WWW.CORSAIR.COM.AU

GAMING MONITOR

AOC U34G3X gaming monitor

Ultrawide and ultra capable without ultra pricing

PRICE $649 **ONLINE** au.aoc.com

Do you need an ultrawide gaming monitor? It's certainly the first question to answer for yourself before considering the AOC U34G3X – a 34-inch beast of a screen with some pretty impressive specs to match. Would your day-to-day use and gaming benefit from a 21:9 aspect ratio rather than 16:9? Do your games or consoles even support the format? If so, read on.

Aesthetically, this AOC monitor treads a comfortable line between understated elegance and lavish gaming flair. On the front, limited branding and text along with thin bezels make sure the display itself is very much the centre of attention. The monitor's stand holds the product's only real design flourish, with some red trim accenting a large cable management hole in the centre of the vertical support and some particularly long feet drawing some of the eye's attention. This latter component is likely to accommodate for the impressive 23° of bi-directional swivel the ultrawide monitor is capable of – when you swing something nearing a metre in width, you want to make sure it's supported.

Also of note in the adjustability department: the display can move a full 13cm up or down, with this and all other tweaks being made effortlessly but not feeling flimsy or unsecured.

One area where the flimsiness is notable, however, is in the front panel buttons. To be fair, we've rarely encountered a monitor that does this well, but operating the intricate menu systems on board the AOC U34G3X is tedious enough already without having to also interact with wobbly buttons that don't always register a press.

Where the U34G3X truly shines is when you're playing games that not only support the ultrawide format, but truly benefit from it. While in FPS titles you'll receive some extra peripheral vision (if variable field of view is supported by the game), in strategy titles like Civilization V, it means being able to see a much larger area of the map at once, handily increasing your ability to strategise while also reducing the need to scroll around. This panel also features a 1ms response time for almost zero-lag gaming, while FreeSync and a 144Hz refresh rate combine to deliver buttery-smooth frame rates.

The display's 300 nits of brightness is relatively low compared to others in the market – but for better you'll be paying more. It's still plenty enough to still show a clear image with some ambient room lighting, and the HDR10 support offers better contrast (with three variable settings for picture, movie or game). This AOC display's colour accuracy makes it more than good enough for gaming and watching movies, and unless you're editing a major cinematic release, you'll find it good for most other creative work as well.

When looking at the full package – with the massive size, resolution, refresh rate and more – there's little that competes with this AOC monitor at its $649 price point. So if your answer to this review's opening questions are 'yes', then the AOC U34G3X is your friend. HARRY DOMANSKI

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

If you truly need ultrawide gaming, then this AOC screen offers a whole lot of bang for the buck.

82

2

1

GROUP TEST

HIGH REFRESH RATE MONITORS

You don't need to be an esports pro to get the most out of a high refresh monitor.

By Jeremy Laird

Want a gaming monitor? Then get one with a high refresh rate. On that we all agree. Everything else is pretty much up for grabs, and boy are there plenty of features to ponder with the latest gaming panels.

Deciding between an IPS or VA panel is already a conundrum and a half. And what about panel, size, shape and resolution? Is the 16:9 aspect ratio still the most versatile or is ultrawide the way to go? Oh, and price. The best high refresh rate monitors ain't cheap, unfortunately. But nor are they necessarily megabucks.

If you feel you can't answer any of these questions then don't fret, we're here to help. For we've done the testing, played the games, and made our conclusions in the hope of offering you a firm answer on which high refresh rate monitor is worth your money.

MPG ARTYMIS 343CQR

90

MSI **$1,599**

Way ahead of the curve.

1 For a while it looked odds-on curved panels would assimilate the whole gaming market. More recently, the popularity of curved LCD monitors seems to have tailed off just a little. Curved HDTVs proved to be a largely passing fad. But with the MPG ARTYMIS 343CQR, MSI has clearly decided that if it's going to keep the faith with curved PC monitors, it's going to absolutely own the issue. This thing has a tight 1000R curve. That means the arc of the panel is such that, when extended full circle, the radius of said circle would be just one metre. This is one seriously bent screen. Beyond that, critical speeds and feeds include 34-inch ultrawide panel proportions, 3440 x 1440 resolution, 165Hz refresh, 1ms (MPRT) response, and DisplayHDR 400. Underpinning all that is the 343CQR's other eyebrow tweaker, beyond the extreme curve, namely VA panel technology. For pure visual spectacle and gaming immersion, no other high refresh rate monitor comes close to the MPG.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- VA panel positively pops
- Extreme curve is seriously immersive
- Excellent brightness and contrast

SPECS **SCREEN SIZE:** 34-INCH / **PANEL TYPE:** VA / **ASPECT RATIO:** 21:9 / **NATIVE RESOLUTION:** 3440 X 1440 / **RESPONSE TIME:** 1MS (MPRT) / **REFRESH RATE:** 165HZ / **BRIGHTNESS:** 550CD/M2

Agon AG273QXP

80

AOC **$619**

The messiah of monitors? Not quite

2 Why, exactly, does the AOC Agon AG273QXP run at 170Hz refresh? Is it a cynical marketing move designed to give AOC's latest gaming panel a superficial edge over the usual 165Hz suspects? Is there some specific technical reason for the extra 5Hz?

One thing is for sure, there's absolutely no chance of spotting the difference between 165Hz and 170Hz in-game. It's hard enough to reliably pick 165Hz from 144Hz or even 240Hz. An extra 5Hz? No chance.

It's a pity to be distracted by such trivia, because the AOC Agon AG273QXP has loads going for it. That 170Hz panel is a 1440p IPS item, which makes it something of a Goldilocks model for modern gaming. Not too many pixels. Not too few. But just the right balance between visual detail and frame rate.

To that you can add extras like adaptive sync support in the form of AMD FreeSync Premium Pro and Nvidia G-Sync Compatibility, plus VESA DisplayHDR 400 certification. Rounding it all out is a claimed response time of 1ms.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Gorgeous 1440p IPS panel
- Low latency, fast response
- Decent HDR support

SPECS **SCREEN SIZE:** 27-INCH / **PANEL TYPE:** IPS / **ASPECT RATIO:** 16:9 / **NATIVE RESOLUTION:** 2560 X 1440 / **RESPONSE TIME:** 1MS (GTG) / **REFRESH RATE:** 170HZ / **BRIGHTNESS:** 400CD/M2

Predator XB253QGX

80

ACER **$569**

The best 240Hz monitor rocks a 0.5ms response

3 1080p not your bag? Better jog on as the Acer Predator XB253QGX won't be for you. It isn't really for most of us, either, given 1440p is a better all-round compromise for most gamers from a purely visual point. But if ultra low latency, and frames rates high enough to give you a nosebleed sounds like your thing, this 1080p 25-incher should be on your shortlist.

It's very similar to the Alienware 25, but clocks in at a mere 240Hz to the Alienware's outrageous 360Hz. In truth, only the most demanding esports addicts will be able to tell the difference. But if you are that sensitive to latency, the Acer's 1080p resolution actually makes sense. After all, the fewer the pixels, the higher your frame rate.

You can tune pixel response through an overdrive setting, but the most aggressive setting introduces some ghosting. But set to medium, this is a very quick IPS monitor. That said, even with a claimed MPRT response time of just 0.5ms this is not an entirely blur-free monitor.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Seriously snappy response
- Very low latency
- Decent IPS image quality

SPECS SCREEN SIZE: 25-INCH / **PANEL TYPE:** IPS / **ASPECT RATIO:** 16:9 / **NATIVE RESOLUTION:** 1920 X 1080 / **RESPONSE TIME:** 0.5MS (MPRT) / **REFRESH RATE:** 240HZ / **BRIGHTNESS:** 400CD

25 AW2521H

80

ALIENWARE **789**

Hitting 360Hz is the ultimate flex

4 There's an elephant in this high refresh rate monitor round up. And it's the inevitable question of diminishing returns. When do they kick in? 165Hz? 240Hz? How about 360Hz? Oh yes, this updated Alienware 25 is good for the full 360. In purely experiential and subjective terms, it's not easy to separate it from otherwise similar 1080p IPS monitors that hum along at a comparatively pedestrian 240Hz refresh.

Of course, esports aficionados with ninjascopic reflexes will appreciate the difference. And there's certainly no penalty to pay, given this IPS panel. It's not like you're forced to suffer a dingy TN panel to have all those Hz. As for pixel response, it's about as good as IPS monitors get, though once again hard to really separate from the cheaper 240Hz brigade.

But it's Alienware's other qualities that set it apart. For starters, this is the brightest of the 25-inch bunch. The Nvidia G-Sync chip also makes for a smoother low-frame-rate experience than a mere G-Sync 'Compatible' or FreeSync display.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- The ultimate esports panel
- Punchy image quality
- Excellent latency and response

SPECS SCREEN SIZE: 25-INCH / **PANEL TYPE:** IPS / **ASPECT RATIO:** 16:9 / **NATIVE RESOLUTION:** 1920 X 1080 / **RESPONSE TIME:** 1MS (GTG) / **REFRESH RATE:** 360HZ / **BRIGHTNESS:** 400CD

4

5

6

Q&A

How many Hz do you really need?
If you're asking the question, 144Hz is probably plenty. Esports fiends who will really appreciate higher refresh rates already know who they are and what they want.

What resolution should you go for?
Even with the latest unobtainable graphics cards, 4K gaming at high triple-digit refresh rates is a stretch in most games.

So, 1440p (at either 16:9 or 21:9 aspect ratio) is probably the better compromise. 1080p is mainly of interest to those who demand the very highest frame rates for shooters.

What about the curve conundrum?
For our money, curved panels make most sense in larger formats and with super-wide 21:9 or wider panels. A curved panel on, say, a smaller 27-inch 16:9 panel isn't necessarily a bad thing. But nor does it really add much to the experience.

Predator XB273K

80

ACER **$1,599**

The best 4K high refresh rate panel is gonna cost ya

5 Never mind a new generation of GPUs you can't buy, and consoles in short supply, 4K remains a problematic resolution for gaming. It's just sooo many pixels. Over eight million, in fact. Even at a mere 60Hz, that's 500 million pixels that have to be rendered, rasterised, ray-traced each and every second.

That works out at over a billion per second at 144Hz, which just so happens to be the refresh rate of the Acer Predator XB273K. Compared to the pricier Acer Predator X27, it lacks local dimming, delivers lower peak brightness and is merely G-Sync 'Compatible'. Of course, affordability is relative and the XB273K is still a pretty pricey panel. Indeed, with 120Hz 4K OLED TVs available for not all that much more than this 27-inch monitor, the value proposition isn't exactly compelling.

None of which to say this screen lacks appeal. No, siree. Once you've seen Cyberpunk 2077 running in full IPS-plus-4K glory, you won't want to go back to 1440p, let alone 1080p.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Gorgeous 4K IPS image quality
- Good response and latency
- Basic HDR support

SPECS **SCREEN SIZE:** 27-INCH / **PANEL TYPE:** IPS / **ASPECT RATIO:** 16:9 / **NATIVE RESOLUTION:** 3840 X 2160 / **RESPONSE TIME:** 1MS (GTG) / **REFRESH RATE:** 144HZ / **BRIGHTNESS:** 400CD/M2

VX2718-2KPC-MHD

70

VIEWSONIC **$299**

This budget 165Hz 1440p panel cuts too many corners

6 VA panel technology used to spell certain doom when it comes to pixel response. More recently, Samsung, among others, has proven that VA can deliver. If not quite IPS-matching response, then certainly good enough performance for all but the most demanding gamers.

Unfortunately, the Viewsonic VX2718 is a VA screen slightly out of the old school. Crank this 27-inch, 1440p curved monitor over for the first time and it doesn't bode well. The VX2718 is a bit of a blurry mess. It does improve with a little time and temperature. But even fully warmed up, it's simply not as quick as the latest IPS panels. Or the implied performance of the 1ms MPRT response.

The 1440p native resolution on a 27-inch panel is a sweet combo for balancing frame rates with in-game detail, while the VA panel tech delivers plenty of contrast. Of course, it's competitively priced, but the mediocre response and lack of punch might feel a bit too budget for most people.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Attractive price
- Frame rate and pixel count ratio
- Good contrast from VA panel

SPECS **SCREEN SIZE:** 27-INCH / **PANEL TYPE:** VA / **ASPECT RATIO:** 16:9 / **NATIVE RESOLUTION:** 2560 X 1440 / **RESPONSE TIME:** 1MS (MPRT) / **REFRESH RATE:** 165HZ / **BRIGHTNESS:** 250CD/M2

GROUP TEST

LIGHTWEIGHT GAMING MICE

The key to competitive gaming success? A lightweight mouse... maybe. *By Josh Brown*

Though we've come quite a long way since hefty rubber balls traversed freebie magazine mousepads, even the most popular gaming mice still have a bit of heft to them. Hence why the term 'lightweight' has become the major buzzword for manufacturers looking to flog the latest line of top-tier gaming mice in the past couple of years. Nowadays there are heaps of lightweight gaming mice available, ready to usurp your desktop from the classics.

When it comes to shedding a few grams each company has taken a slightly different route, resulting in multiple ultra-lightweight gaming mice best suited to all manner of player and grip style. Whether you're looking for cut-outs that increase airflow and lighten the payload, or a wireless option that opts for style over fluid useability, there's an ultra-lightweight gaming mouse out there for everyone right now.

2

1

Aerox 3 Wireless

90

STEELSERIES **$189**

The best lightweight wireless gaming mouse

Steelseries has hit a sweet spot with the Aerox 3 Wireless. The honeycomb perforations spread further than most, giving even the tops of your fingers a breeze, and it features a coarse outer shell for those who need the extra grip. The otherwise beautiful RGB trim reveals visible circuitry which, depending on taste, can cheapen the overall look.

Small hands and a claw grip will go a long way here. Large-handed palm grip gamers might find themselves dragging their digits. Even when opting for that slimmer profile, though, the Aerox 3 Wireless managed to provide Bluetooth connectivity on top of its lightning-fast 2.4Gz mode.

Paired with a physical CPI button just above the mouse wheel, RGB lighting, a mammoth 200+ battery life (with fast charge and USB Type-C), and an included receiver hub and cable, there's a degree of flexibility here that other wireless options in its grade just can't match. And it's only three grams heavier than the other wireless mouse included in this group test.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Great battery life
- Breathable casing
- USB-C charging

SPECS **WEIGHT:** 66G / **CPI:** 20,000 / **POLLING RATE:** 1,000HZ / **SENSOR:** OPTICAL / **INTERFACE:** WIRELESS, USB, BLUETOOTH 5.0 / **BUTTONS:** 6 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED

2

Makalu 67

90

MOUNTAIN **US$59.99**

Great for larger hands

The Mountain Makalu 67 is a stylish piece of kit. It's also the chunkier option on this list, making it a great choice for the bigger-handed player looking for an ultra-lightweight clicker. Its large stature and heavily curved body should suit palm grips the best, but claw grip players shouldn't notice any major downsides.

There's a deeply satisfying click from the two well-pronounced thumb buttons, which sit relatively high up the body, giving your thumb plenty of space to work with. The cable is loose and light enough to whip around no problem, but the long rubber stem pinning it to the chassis might snag on a mousepad with any sort of raised edge, like from a USB hub.

It would have been nice to see the breathable perforations stretch to the thumb and finger areas as well, but overall, the Mountain Makalu 67 is a solid choice, and one that's far lighter than it looks. It even features handy indentations to make replacing the mouse feet a breeze when the time comes.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Large but lightweight
- Gorgeous RGB around the wheel
- Plenty of grip

SPECS **WEIGHT:** 67G / **CPI:** 19,000 / **POLLING RATE:** 1,000HZ / **SENSOR:** OPTICAL / **INTERFACE:** USB / **BUTTONS:** 6 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED

THERE'S NO WAY A TENSE GRIP WILL CRUSH IT LIKE A CAN

3

MM720

COOLER MASTER **$69**

70

The travel-friendly ultra-lightweight option

3 The Cooler Master MM720 is by far the smallest of the bunch here, meaning it's also the lightest at a mere 49 grams. It features the trendy honeycomb design but swaps a long body for a stubby design you could mistake for a cheap travel mouse you'd find grossly overpriced at an airport technology store.

Its smooth, plastic finish isn't the most premium around, but there's no way a tense grip will crush it like a can. And despite the perforations, it's IP58 water-resistant, so dropping a gamer beverage over this thing won't destine it for the trash heap.

Its comparatively tiny footprint isn't just a by-product of Cooler Master aiming for that ultra-lightweight buzzword: there's a method in the miniature form-factor in that it's primarily designed for a claw grip. There's no reason a palm or hybrid grip won't work, but prepare for your digits to curl over the clickers if that's the case. Either way, the much appreciated finger rest on the right-hand side should help keep things comfortable.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Tiny footprint
- Appreciable lighting
- Very light

SPECS **WEIGHT:** 49G / **CPI:** 16,000 / **POLLING RATE:** 1000HZ / **SENSOR:** OPTICAL / **INTERFACE:** USB / **BUTTONS:** 6 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED

G Pro X Superlight

LOGITECH **$279**

90

A good wireless option that can be great

4 Logitech has a storied history in the PC peripheral space, so it should come as no surprise to see them enter the ultra-lightweight game. The Pro X Superlight is about as sleek as stylish as they come. Devoid of RGB, it wouldn't look out of place in an office. Its shell is perhaps too smooth, but at a mere 63g it manages to weigh less than even most wired options while packing a 70+ hour battery.

By far the best part of the Superlight is its wireless functionality. Sure, the battery of this particular pointer could run dry at a moment's notice, but by going deeper into the ecosystem, Powerplay wireless charging can keep it going indefinitely for a bit of extra cash.

The side buttons may be a little too mushy for some players, but had it not been for the Steelseries, this would be the wireless option to beat. It's just a shame Bluetooth support may have been cut to save on some weight, which leaves its connectivity options lacking compared to its rivals.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Comfortable
- Stylish
- Stellar sensor

SPECS **WEIGHT:** 63G / **CPI:** 25,600 / **POLLING RATE:** 1,000HZ / **SENSOR:** OPTICAL / **INTERFACE:** WIRELESS, USB / **BUTTONS:** 5 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED

WHAT MAKES A GREAT MOUSE SENSOR?

Hyper-accurate sensors play a big part in gaming mouse design these days. At higher refresh rates and resolutions, the need for next-generation sensors exists to ensure players aren't held back by the very thing designed to replicate their movements. Sensors need to be capable of maintaining accurate, low-jitter operation at high speed. There are a few key metrics to look out for: CPI (counts per inch, often inaccurately described as DPI), which determines how many times a mouse reports your movement per inch; acceleration, not to be confused with software acceleration, is the rate at which the mouse will function with force; and lift-off distance, which tells you how far you could lift your mouse off the mat while retaining a reading. Something to consider when deciding which mouse is for you.

Model O

GLORIOUS **$129**

80

The original ultra-lightweight king

5 The Glorious Model O takes cues from Razer's iconic designs and packages it into what feels like a more reliable chassis. It features contoured left and right-click buttons, an absolutely fabulous matte (or gloss) finish that's silky smooth to the touch, and a modestly angled body that will offer solid support – with the correct grip, of course.

The relatively low profile of the Glorious Model O might have palm grip players scraping their wrists a little too much for comfort, while those with larger hands might struggle to find the space for their thumb to sit without mushing the two left-side clickers. Its body screams quality, but when you're not rubbing your palms all over its smooth skin like that of a fidget toy, the light scratching of the front feet might just get into your head.

It's not the smoothest mouse on the mousepad, but that could be down to its four comparatively small feet. And unless you spring for the smaller Model O-, it's not actually the lightest mouse around these days.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Well built
- Zero tracking issues
- Smooth yet grippy

SPECS WEIGHT: 67G / **CPI:** 12,000 / **POLLING RATE:** 1000HZ / **SENSOR:** OPTICAL / **INTERFACE:** USB / **BUTTONS:** 6 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED

Viper 8KHz

RAZER **$119**

80

A snappy sensor you can count on

6 Razer slides into the ultra-lightweight gaming market this year with the wired Razer Viper 8KHz. The name is really just a fancy way of saying the mouse reports its position to your computer a whopping 8,000 times per second. Is it noticeable in game? Not really. But it's a reassuring claim to fame that should reduce figurative mouse latency to a frankly ludicrous low.

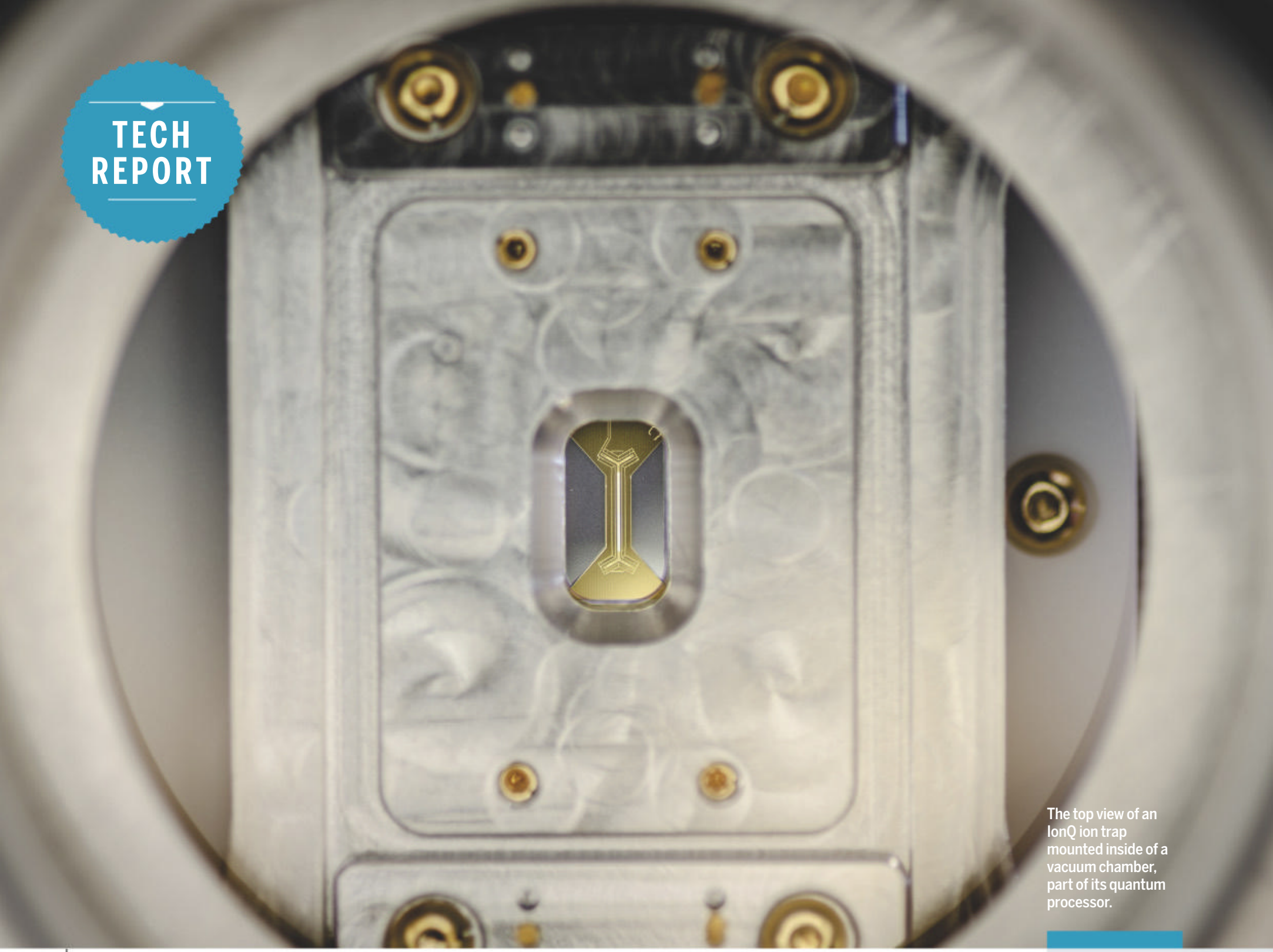
The fast sensor is housed in a solid plastic chassis that's segmented in a cyborg-esque fashion. And it looks smoother than it actually is. Lay your palm over the low-profile body and you'll have a slightly textured grip and curved mouse buttons to keep you in place. With five CPI profiles of the box, the only real reason to need Razer's own software clogging up your machine is to set a reachable toggle, as it's inconveniently placed underneath.

The whole package doesn't feel quite as high quality as some others, but its ambidextrous design makes it the most well-rounded.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Ambidextrous
- Unique cyborg design
- Groundbreaking sensor

SPECS WEIGHT: 71G / **CPI:** 20,000 / **POLLING RATE:** 8,000HZ / **SENSOR:** OPTICAL / **INTERFACE:** USB / **BUTTONS:** 6 / **ERGONOMIC:** AMBIDEXTROUS



The top view of an IonQ ion trap mounted inside of a vacuum chamber, part of its quantum processor.

CRYPTO CRACKERS

Could a sufficiently powerful computer bring down Bitcoin?

Anyone who is not heartily sick of the words 'blockchain', 'crypto', and 'NFT' (and, indeed, mentions of quantum computing in these pages) may be interested to hear that, in a few years' time, the whole thing might go away.

It'll probably be replaced by something worse, of course, but the argument over the subject is interesting. Could a sufficiently powerful quantum computer, one that's not been invented as yet, bring the whole blockchain network down around our ankles?

It's easy, and often fun, to attribute remarkable powers to inventions of the future. Imagining VR that links itself directly to your visual cortex does not make it a reality, but quantum computers exist in the same way VR helmets do: the ones we know about are very early models that could all do with some improvement. And the ones we don't know about? Well, who knows what the world's governments are up to?

Wild speculation aside, the problem here is asymmetric cryptography. Two keys are generated, and they have a mathematical relationship – the public key can be derived from the private key, but not the other way around. The public key is just that – public. It's used by anyone who wants to encrypt information that only you can read. The asymmetric bit means that running the encrypted data through the public key backwards (as you would with something like Enigma, for example) doesn't decrypt it: for that you need the private key which you don't tell anyone, even your psychiatrist. From this system the blockchain, Bitcoin, NFTs and a market worth over $100 billion were born.

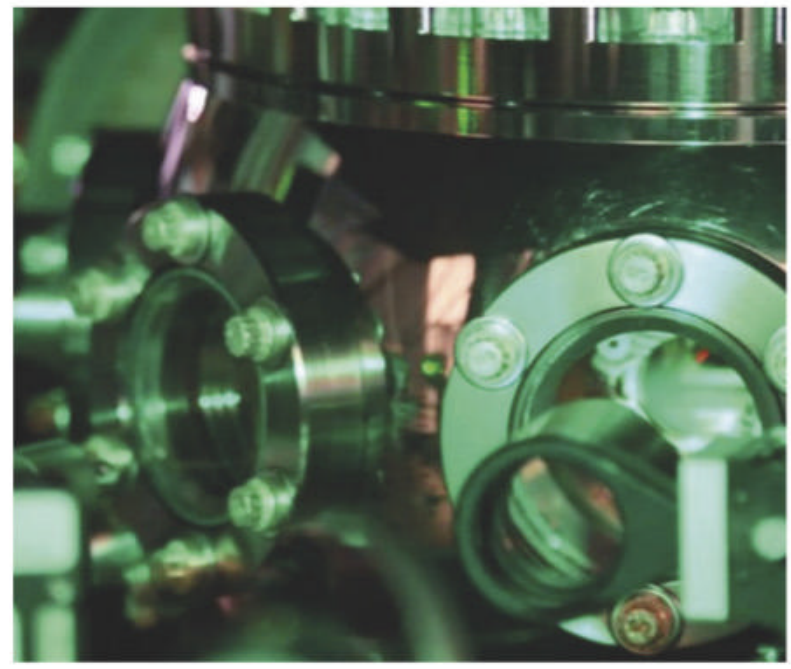
Now, far be it for us to suggest a system in which miners can screw up both the environment and the supply of GPUs to gamers, and which can see a single grey pixel sell for US$1.36 million at Sotheby's, might be a bit silly. We'd just point out that this magazine costs a mere $10 yet contains many more pixels, some of them not grey. Enough, we'd estimate, for more than one per reader. But then we're not selling PC Gamer as an NFT. Yet...

BLOCKED

For those still stumbling around in the dark about how a blockchain works, here's a summary. When a transaction is requested, a 'block' containing that transaction is created. This is then sent to every 'node', or participant, on the particular network (that can be Bitcoin, Etherium, Dogecoin, whatever). The nodes work to validate the transaction, using the SHA256 algorithm (in the case of Bitcoin) to 'hash' the block into a 256bit hexadecimal number that uniquely identifies it. This is 'mining', and the first miner to validate the transaction in this way is rewarded with some Bitcoin (6.25 at the time of writing) depending on the difficulty.

Bitcoin billionaire

Bitcoin's inventor, who goes by the pseudonym of Satoshi Nakamoto, allegedly has a million of them in a potentially insecure wallet, a tempting target for someone with the right sort of processing power to go after. Nakamoto stepped back from the cryptocurrency project in 2010, and debate over his identity has raged ever since.



FAR LEFT: IBM's Hummingbird 65-qubit quantum processor.

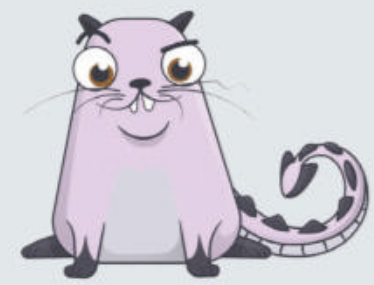
LEFT: Honeywell's Quantum H1 computer has ten qubits.

NFT MADNESS *The price of digital art goes up... and down again*

1 EVERYDAYS: THE FIRST 5000 DAYS
Beeple's collage, based on his popular Instagram, sold for US$69.3 million.

2 THE PIXEL
Digital artist Pak sold The Pixel, which is literally a grey square, for US$1.3 million at a Sotheby's auction.

3 JACK DORSEY'S FIRST TWEET
A piece of internet history? Perhaps, but is it worth US$2.9 million?



4 CRYPTOKITTIES DRAGON
Got 600 Etherium (US$1.45m) burning a hole in your hardware wallet? Why not buy a virtual pet?

That difficulty is altered depending on how fast blocks are added to the chain, as the Bitcoin protocol aims for six new blocks an hour. Difficulty is measured by the number of leading zeroes on an acceptable hash result. Each block, along with everything we've measured so far, contains a 'nonce' (a Number Only used oNCE). This is a number that can be varied to get the desired result, as changing it alters the hash. So if the difficulty is 15, you alter the nonce until your hash comes out with 15 leading zeroes. Once validated, the new block is added to a chain, with each block's header containing the hash of the one before it, and distributed across the network again. Only then is the transaction done.

Blockchain is secure because making even the smallest change to a transaction that's been validated changes the hash produced, so everyone on the network would notice. There's also an additional security feature known as 'pay to public key hash' that hashes public keys and only reveals them when a transaction is initiated. Also, in a perfect world, each address would only be used once. Address reuse is rife, however, and a study by Deloitte found that around 25% of all Bitcoins are vulnerable in this way, along with the many, many cryptocoins whose owners have lost their private keys, and therefore cannot transfer them out of vulnerable wallets.

Still, the system seems to work pretty well as long as no one has a sufficiently powerful computer. To derive a private key from a public one involves tackling an elliptic curve discrete logarithm problem that would take a regular computer somewhere in the range of 65 million billion years to solve. An unencrypted public key is included with every Bitcoin transaction – it acts as the address of the recipient – and left unprotected for the time it takes for the network to confirm the block, which is around ten minutes. Theoretically, that's enough time for a powerful enough quantum computer to calculate the private key and replace the recipient's address with someone else's before the hash is generated. Miners are changing the nonce all the time, so a change to a different part of the block could go unnoticed.

YOU COULD USE A QUANTUM COMPUTER TO MINE MUCH, MUCH FASTER THAN EVERYBODY ELSE.

And then there's another thing. You could use a quantum computer to mine much, much faster than everybody else, inserting your own blocks into the chain for potentially nefarious purposes or to bring the whole system down.

So, the big question is, how many qubits would a theoretical quantum computer need to take a tin-opener to Bitcoin? 4,000, according to Miruna Rosca, a PhD student in post-quantum cryptography, in an interview with Decrypt. How many are there in the current most powerful known quantum computer? 72 (Google). Or maybe 10 (Honeywell). Or perhaps 32 (IonQ). The Chinese Jiuzhang computer doesn't give a qubit figure, but its operators claim it's 10 billion times faster than Google's. IBM is promising a 1,000-qubit machine by 2023. It took 14 years for X86 CPUs to go from 1GHz to 4GHz, so could 4,000 qubits be here by 2037? We wouldn't bet our Bitcoins against it, so it's now up to blockchain architects to evolve quantum-secure cryptography before their secrets are opened up for the world to see. ■

Ian Evenden

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Hagionaut

GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLORED

A dash of conspiracy and the occult spices up the adventure.

BROKEN SWORD: THE SHADOW OF THE TEMPLARS

Revisiting a point-and-click classic. *By Andy Kelly*

B*roken Sword* is a game that knows every great mystery needs a killer premise to hook you in. It begins with an American tourist on vacation in France, sipping coffee outside a Parisian cafe. Then a guy dressed as a clown blows it up. Most people would fly home and try to forget about it, but George Stobbart is not most people: he's an adventure game protagonist. You know what those guys are like. Vacation be damned, he wants to know who tried to kill him – and he's going to find out by picking up a bunch of random objects and solving puzzles with them.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED 1996	**DEVELOPER** Revolution Software
PUBLISHER Virgin Interactive	**LINK** revolution.co.uk

Developed by UK studio Revolution Software and released in 1996, *Broken Sword* is one of the best point-and-click adventure games ever made. It's beautiful to look at. The puzzles are great. The music is sublime. The characters are memorable. The story is full of twists and turns. And it's funny. Like, really funny. It's everything an adventure game should be, and age hasn't dulled its edge one bit.

Four more *Broken Sword* games were released after this one, and while they all have their moments, the original remains the best in the series by quite a margin.

BLADE RUNNER

The key thing is that George is not a detective; he's a lawyer with a goofy sense of humour. But nearly being blown up by a terrorist disguised as a clown inspires him to become one, and reveals a deeper side to him. He's smart, resourceful, and absolutely unshakeable when it comes to the pursuit of justice. He searches the streets (and, more than once, the stinking sewers) of Paris for clues. And as you play, his pockets begin to overflow with objects that may or may not be related to the case. It is a point-and-click adventure game after all.

A plastic red nose. A torn piece of weirdly patterned fabric. An ancient manuscript. A small handful of plaster of Paris. A greasy tissue. Man, he loves showing people that gross tissue. Waving it in front of anyone who'll listen, saying "What does this tissue mean to you?", and awaiting the inevitable disgusted response is one of the game's best running jokes. Every time I meet a new character, it's the first thing I do, just to see their reaction. And the game knows it too, throwing in the odd

unexpected response, or one that takes a subtle dig at you for doing it.

As he investigates the bombing, George finds a partner: a newspaper reporter called Nico Collard, whose apartment George visits regularly throughout the game. They have real chemistry, and I love how their relationship grows over the course of the game. It's one of the best depictions of a friendship forming I've seen in a game. Together the pair find themselves tangled up in an ancient conspiracy that runs far deeper than they ever imagined. The killer clown was just the tip of the iceberg, and one small part of a larger, more complex mystery.

One of the best things about *Broken Sword*'s story is how it's all based on real history – specifically the legend of the Knights Templar. As George hunts for the clown, he learns about this ancient order of knights and a treasure hoard they supposedly hid before they were dissolved and their last Grand Master was burned at the stake in Paris. Author Dan Brown famously leaned on the same mythology in his wildly popular book The Da Vinci Code, which has a lot in common with *Broken Sword* – but Revolution did it first, and did it better.

In *Broken Sword*, the Templars still exist and are trying to take over the world – a plan George and Nico take it upon themselves to stop. It's a compelling mix of real-world history and the occult, wrapped around an intriguing murder mystery. George's quest for the truth takes him all over the world, from Paris to a sleepy town in Ireland, a Syrian marketplace, a Spanish village, and a train speeding through the Scottish countryside. It's a real globe-trotting adventure, and the colourful,

HISTORY LESSON *The* Broken Sword *series so far*

BS: THE SHADOW OF THE TEMPLARS
1996

The game that started it all. Revolution had developed two games before it – *Lure of the Temptress* and *Beneath a Steel Sky* – but this was way ahead of them both in terms of art, design and flair.

BS II: THE SMOKING MIRROR
1997

The second best game in the series. George and Nico's growing relationship makes for some fun moments, the story is great (if not quite as compelling as the original), and the exotic locations provide a great backdrop.

BS: THE SLEEPING DRAGON
2003

The first game in the series to make the leap to three dimensions. Not as artistically sumptuous as its predecessors, and the puzzles get repetitive, but the story is decent and George and Nico are as likeable as ever.

BS: THE ANGEL OF DEATH
2006

Another 3D game, and the first *Broken Sword* to be co-developed with another studio: in this case, Sumo Digital. After the previous game was criticised for having too many action set-pieces, they were reduced in *The Angel of Death*.

BS 5: THE SERPENT'S CURSE
2013-4

For this return to *Broken Sword*'s 2D roots, Revolution raised over $800,000 via Kickstarter and PayPal donations. Not quite as good as the first two games and a little too easy, but captures some of their magic.

Broken Sword: The Shadow of the Templars

evocative scenery is constantly changing around you.

Ireland is probably the highlight. George is here following a lead about an archeological dig where a priceless Templar artefact has allegedly been dug up. When he gets there, his first stop is MacDevitt's – a rustic country pub specialising in real ale and frequented by talkative locals. If I could drink a pint in any virtual pub, it would be this one. I like to think I'd be able to handle the booze better than George does here, though. Order one too many and he starts getting rowdy. Well, as rowdy as a Californian lawyer can get. And the barman doesn't seem too keen on his drunken idea to turn MacDevitt's into a trendy cocktail bar.

The overarching story in *Broken Sword* is great, but it's moments like this that make it really special. The quiet moments where the well-written characters are given a chance to shine, and the warm, witty humour comes to the forefront. It's an incredibly cosy game. The slow pace, hand-painted backgrounds, and orchestral music give it a really pleasant atmosphere. If you've ever watched a British detective drama, it has a similar vibe. Thrilling, exciting, but in a pretty subtle way, with lots of nice scene-setting and quirky, light-hearted conversations in between all the murders.

George meets a lot of memorable characters, including a hospital cleaner whose best friend is a floor polishing machine called Mr Shiny, a detective convinced he has psychic powers, and a mischievous youngster called Liam Maguire who tries to rope him into a scheme to steal him a crate of lager. And who can forget Lady Pierremont, an obscenely posh hotel guest with a plummy English accent who helps George pilfer the key to a room through sheer upper class arrogance. I love all these weirdos, and their voices are forever etched into my mind.

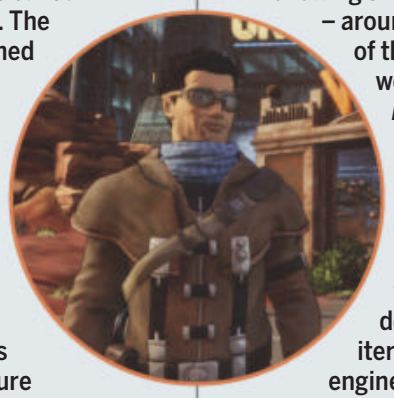
UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

The voice acting, incidentally, is brilliant. It's quite scrappy in places, occasionally sounding like it was recorded in a bathroom stall. (It might have been; Revolution was a small studio at the time.) But that only adds to its charm. And actor Rolf Saxon (who has appeared in a bunch of stuff, including Tomorrow Never Dies, Saving Private Ryan, and Mission: Impossible) is perfect as George Stobbart. In fact, I don't know if the character would work half as well without him. He brings just the right amount of warmth and deadpan humour to the role, but with a tough, determined edge – which mirrors the

THEATRE OF DREAMS

A brief history of Broken Sword's *engine*

Broken Sword, like most games developed by Revolution Software, uses an in-house engine called Virtual Theatre. The studio was formed in 1990 by Charles Cecil, Tony Warriner, David Sykes, and Noirin Carmody, and its first project was *Lure of the Temptress*. This fantasy adventure game (which is now free on GOG) was the debut of the Virtual Theatre system, which would see characters moving around the world, travelling between locations, and following simple routines – around which many of the puzzles were designed.



Broken Sword, however, doesn't actually utilise Virtual Theatre to the same degree, but an iteration of the engine has been in almost every Revolution game to date, including its latest, *Beyond a Steel Sky*.

Probably nothing suspicious happening here.

BROKEN SWORD'S ANIMATION IS ALSO UNBELIEVABLY LAVISH AND EXPRESSIVE

two sides of the character. *Broken Sword*'s animation is also unbelievably lavish and expressive, which is another important part of why its characters are so memorable. The way they move says as much about them as their voices, whether it's Lady Pierremont's indignant march towards the reception desk at the hotel, or Sean Fitzgerald twitching and eyeing the door nervously in MacDevitt's, visibly worried about something. Artistically, it's one of the prettiest and most atmospheric adventure games of the period. And even though it looks quite low-res and pixelated on big, modern monitors, the quality of the art direction shines through.

But as laid back as *Broken Sword* is, you can still die. Mistakes that lead to George's untimely demise are usually clearly signposted, but you won't be able to resist putting him into dangerous situations to see what happens. You can always reload. Honestly, these scenes feel kind at odds with the rest of the game. It's quite jarring to go from this fun, silly, rip-roaring adventure, to lovely, goofy George being given a pair of concrete shoes by some shady gangsters and thrown into the Seine. It does at least add a sprinkle of genuine danger to the game.

BAAAA HUMBUG

Of course, you can't talk about *Broken Sword* without mentioning the goat puzzle. It stumped so many people that it even has its own Wikipedia page. It's actually pretty simple. When the goat knocks you down, quickly click the old plough on the other side of the screen to trap it. The problem is, there are no other timing-based puzzles in the game. None up until that point, and none after. So you can understand why it has most players reaching for a walkthrough. However, if you're playing the *Director's Cut* version of *Broken Sword*, the timing element has been removed entirely, making the goat puzzle not so infamous.

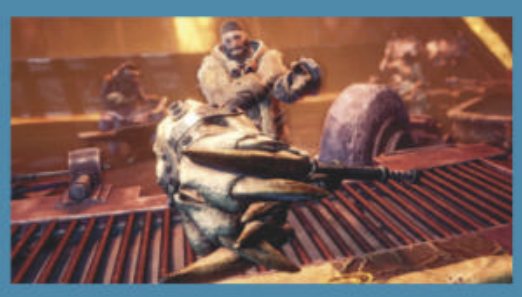
But which version should you play? The *Director's Cut* is excellent, adding a whole new prologue chapter where you play as Nico, new puzzles, neat character portraits by Dave 'Watchmen' Gibbons, a nicely designed hint system, and more. But some elements I'm not so keen on, like the comic book-style text bubbles. I personally prefer playing the original version on ScummVM, because it's the one I remember playing when I first discovered the game. But either way, you're gonna have a good time, and the *Director's Cut* is only £5 on Steam.

It's a shame that dumb goat puzzle is what most people think of when they hear the name *Broken Sword*, because it's really the least interesting thing about it. This is a smart, funny and deeply charming adventure game, and still wonderfully playable today. The puzzle design is mostly logical and even-handed, rarely slipping into the brain-twisting absurdism of many other point-and-click adventures from the mid-to-late '90s. Wacky puzzles, while a staple of the genre, don't age well, which I think is part of *Broken Sword*'s enduring appeal. It's a game I play at least once a year, and every time I do, the magic is still there. ■

CRACKING SKULLS WITH MY BIG HAMMER IN

MONSTER HUNTER WORLD

It's slow, but there's nothing like making monster pancakes. ***By James Davenport***



LEFT: The blacksmith looks like how I feel about bashing heads in.

Snap. Crackle. Pop. Yes, these are the sounds puffed rice cereal makes when coming into contact with milk. But they are also the sound dinosaur skulls make when coming into contact with my very big and very cool hammer.

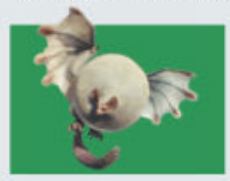
I was going to write 'there's something perverse' about it to kick off the next bit, like some coy introspection, but I'm realising that'd just be saying the loud part louder. Yeah, it's nasty. It's worrisome that I like the feeling of concussing an adorable, fuzzy bat that inflates like a balloon. There are plushies of the Paolumu. Google it 'Paolumu cute cartoon' right now. Adorable, yeah? I love to smash its head in.

The hammer isn't like other weapons in *Monster Hunter*, or most other action games. Every swing takes a good second to wind up. It's heavy, so moving around with it unsheathed means you're practically immobile. The hammer requires patience and precision and close study of every monster attack animation. I sit back while my thirsty longsword and insect glaive friends wail on the intensely cute cartoon bat, inflicting it with hundreds of flesh wounds. My time will come. The bat stops to catch its breath, perhaps to consider whether or not this is it, taking a moment to think about those the bat has loved and lost, whether it had done all the huge bat things it had wanted to in life – I destroy the thought, leaping from a slide with a triple front flip, bringing down the hammer on the crest of their skull effectively liquefying the grey matter inside.

Monster Hunter: World is just as sick as I am, possibly sicker, laying down little gamer treats for me to hoover up on my journey to mastering this outright deranged skill, deflating heads like difficult balloons. To congratulate me for scrambling the Paolumu's brains, sometimes a gem will fly out of a monster's head and an on-screen notification will let me know 'Parts Broken'. I can pick up that little snack during the ensuing break, when the blade crew continues their incessant, mindless blading. I scoop up an extra bit of monster, sheathe my hammer, reposition, and get ready for the next opportunity to smoosh the thing's head into the floor.

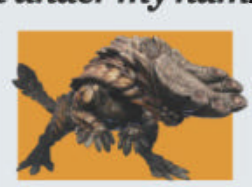
HEADS TO SMASH, RANKED

Which monster brains look best under my hammer



1 PAOLUMU
It inflates, so I must smash into a fine paste.

2 KULU-YA-KU
It looks like a dodo bird, so, I mean I have to...



3 BARROTH
A huge target, a big rock to disintegrate.

4 KIRIN
Small, fast, but the hammer deletes that electric horn.

5 DIABLOS
Those horns gotta go and that won't be a problem.

HAMMER TIME

Sometimes a monster will trip and stay grounded for five to ten seconds. I worry about what happens to my brain while I'm enjoying making theirs basically have to shut down and reboot itself. You get the opportunity – a word I usually save for dream job interviews or fascinating free lectures about the history of statuary or whatever – to just wail on a monster's head with a hammer as big or bigger than it. I just bash and bash and bash with an object the size of an eighth grader that weighs as much as a fridge and would turn any bone and blood adjacent structure into dust and water with a few strong swings. *Monster Hunter: World*'s brutal cartoon logic forces these monsters to endure the force and the pain, to live through a nightmare of pain without the physical degradation; or, the freedom of death. And there I am, feeling rewarded and good about it. Because it is good! And somehow not the horror show I'm describing. It's such an odd, precarious balance. *Monster Hunter: World* renders these creatures with stunning detail. On a PC their skin and fur, expressions, and animations really give the impression of a living creature. It's magical computer puppetry, all propped up in service of being chopped, or in my instance, pounded down. Absolutely pancaked.

The incredible work done in design and QA to make the act of inflicting terrible violence upon innocent, often cute, creatures satisfying and fun far more than grim and cruel is something that'll always confound me. Like, it's the kinda thing that I can't imagine getting past the first meeting. "Alright so I think we should make the hammer bigger and more impactful and the monsters, like, way more realistic and adorable. They shouldn't be conceived of as preternaturally evil or tainted whatsoever." And now it's one of Capcom's best-selling games in recent history. I'm just thinking about the feeling of the hammer connecting with a Kulu-ya-ku skull and getting a little dopamine hit! So yeah. There's something perverse about it alright. ■

THE HAMMER ISN'T LIKE OTHER WEAPONS IN MONSTER HUNTER.

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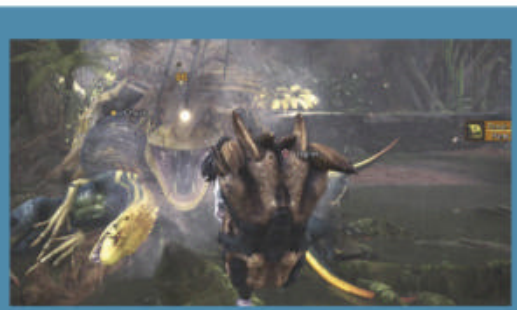

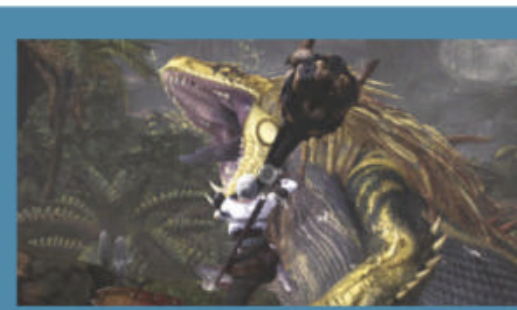

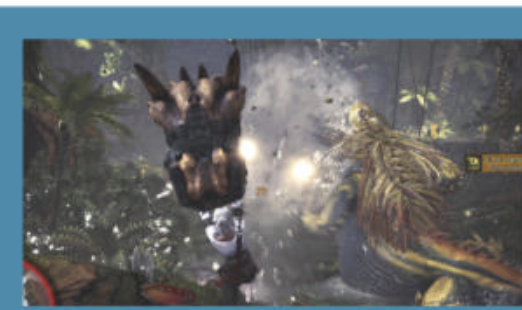

RIGHT: Please hammer do hurt 'em. (This pun is from 1990, thank you very much.)

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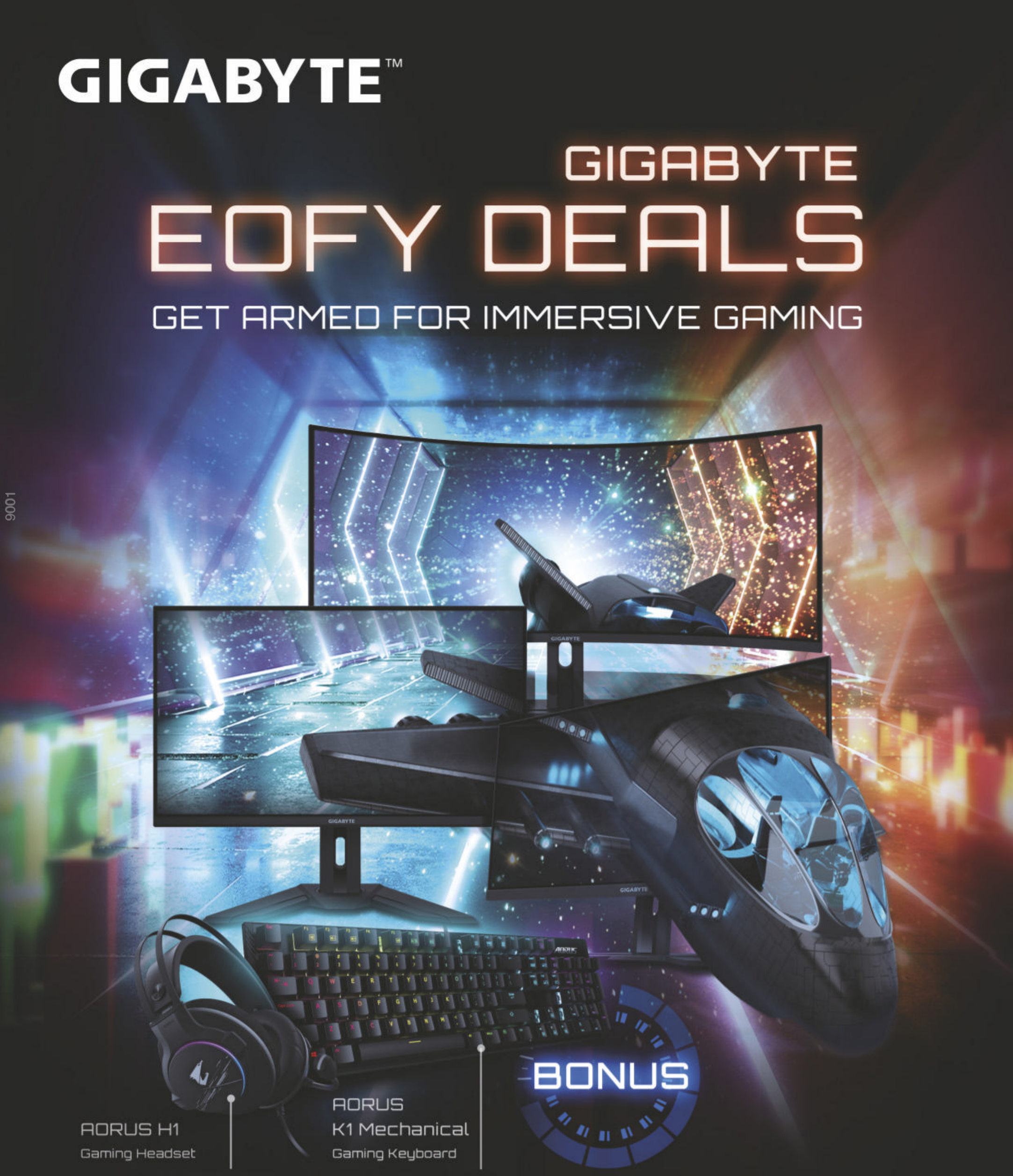

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